

Claims Conference Holocaust Survivor Memoir Collection

Access to the print and/or digital copies of memoirs in this collection is made possible by USHMM on behalf of, and with the support of, the Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany.

The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Library respects the copyright and intellectual property rights associated with the materials in its collection. The Library holds the rights and permissions to put this material online. If you hold an active copyright to this work and would like to have your materials removed from the web please contact the USHMM Library by phone at 202-479-9717, or by email at digital_library@ushmm.org.

Prisoner 409



Eva Gross

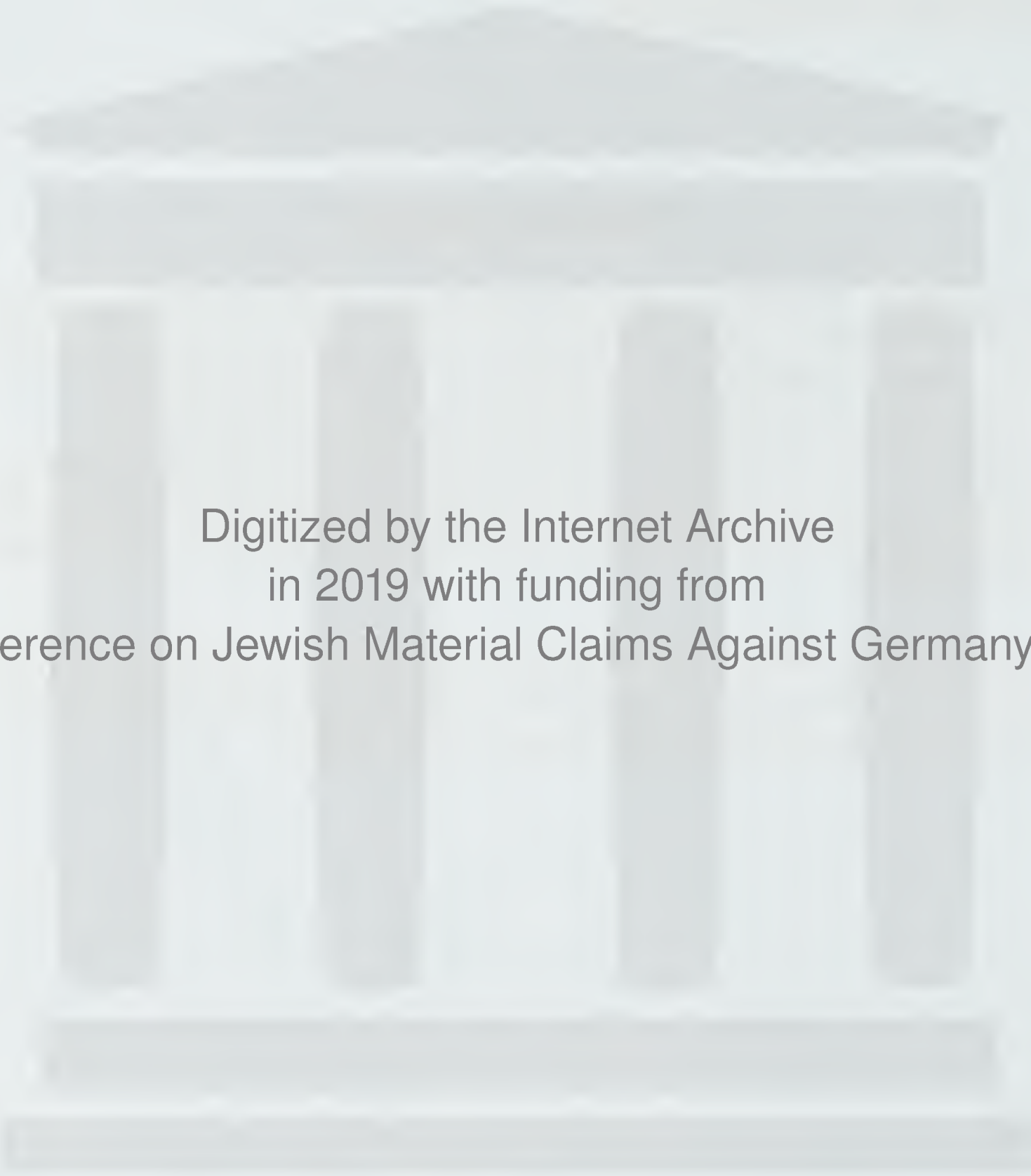
Eva Gross

PII Redacted

About the Author

I am a Hungarian survivor of the Holocaust, a retired teacher with an M.A. Degree in Literature, a student of the Torah, an award winning author, poet, TV producer and painter. I am a Skokie Fine Arts Commissioner, member of the Skokie Art Guild, co-founder of Grassfield Writers' Collective and was honored by former Governor Jim Edgar for, "Contributing all the talent, energy and time devoted to strengthening the cultural fabric of this great state and enriching the lives of many."

PRISONER 409 is written in memory of my parents, relatives, friends, neighbors and the rest of the Jewish population of the village Mor, Hungary, who perished by the hands of the Nazis.



Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2019 with funding from
Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany, Inc.

<https://archive.org/details/prisoner409haftl01gros>

Eva Gross

PII Redacted

Yom Hashoa

**My mother will never grow old.
Her hair stays browns,
her gentle features unchanged
like a fresh rose
encased in a glass globe.
I can hear her tender voice,
feel the soothing touch
of her hands.
In a sweet scented room
she plays the violin,
and lives suspended
in an everlasting glow.**

**My father will never grow old.
He stands on a platform,
watching a marching band.
His regiment salutes the medals
on his chest.
The parade has long passed,
the band is silent.
Yet, I'm still saluting
the ideals my father
implented within me.**

From the book, PRISONER 409

Eva Gross

PII Redacted

To a Member of a Hate Group

Why do you hate me
when we have never met?
What harm have I done to you
or that matter, to any other
member of the human race?
Yet, for my being a Jew ignites in you
a strong urge to destroy me.
Don't be afraid. I wouldn't harm you
anymore than I would an ant,
who wanders into my pantry
and invades my bag of sugar.
I carry the ant outdoors
and let it live.
Aren't you bored by the same
ancient target of hate?
Genius, in the new Millennium
invent a new creature,
a space age scapegoat,
for the purpose
of laying upon it your misery,
account for your shortcomings
and to make you feel superior.

This is just one of the 29 Holocaust related poems

*With their last breath
they blessed His name.*

PII Redacted

PRISONER 409

Chapter 1

We were not what they accused us of being. We were not thieves. We were not cheats. We were not liars. We were not spies for the enemies of our country. We did not commit usury. We were not murderers who sacrificed Christian children for Passover matzo. We did not hoard gold, silver, jewels or foreign currency. We did not think we were better than other people. We were a family of honest Hungarians who happened to be of the Jewish faith. Between World War I and World War II, we viewed with familiar weariness outrageous accusations, waiting patiently for time to absorb them as it had in the past. We loved each other dearly. As World War II began to encircle the globe, our closeness was strength that withstood mounting insults from local toughs and hoodlums, degrading, insidious ridicule from the emotionally twisted, the barely literate who surrounded us. We did not hate even when we were hated. And we believed in the basic dignity of people.

In 1940, our trusted government signed the Three Power Axis Pact, officially joined the German Nazis and Italian Fascists, and steadily turned against us as the enemy within the country. Yet ,we believed that goodness would eventually prevail even after we lost all sense of freedom, even after we were robbed and beaten, even after we were deprived of all our human rights.

My family consisted of my parents, my brother, my maternal grandparents, uncles, aunts and cousins. We were religious, hardworking, educated people, living in the small *Schwabish* (German) village of Mor, nestled beneath the colorful vineyards of the Vertes Mountains, about a hundred kilometers west and two hundred years back from Budapest.

Mor was a quaint, but not a serene or peaceful place. It was misleadingly pretty, a picture postcard of European village fantasy, with peasants in ancient costumes appearing quite charming, quite romantic, but the wind, which never ceased to blow, brought about the dust of hatred and medieval violence.

When I was little, I played protectively in a yard, fenced with tall, thick, bastion-like brick walls, innocently believing I was loved just like the other children.

It was at school where I first encountered rudeness and scorn, which a treatment that shocked me. I thought what set me apart from the other children was that I walked by the crucifix without crossing myself, during class prayer I omitted some parts of the prayer, and I didn't write on Saturdays. Beyond that I saw no difference between the gentiles and myself; yet they treated me as if I had green skin, blue hair, purple eyes and hopped around on three legs or ate crocodile eggs for breakfast!

Actually, I resembled the peasant farmer girl who sat near me, perhaps not so solidly built, but my hair was dark brown like hers, my eyes were blue like hers, only I ate buttered croissant and drank malt coffee for breakfast. Even so, the physical similarities were of no help. The stigma of being a Jew grew faster than I did, becoming progressively worse with the rise of Hitler.

Anti-Semitism always had been prominent throughout the history of Europe. We expected some degree of discrimination practically at every

generation, but the influence of Nazi Germany was like a poisonous snake. Laws after laws were passed against us; a kind of slow suffocation began. It was a twilight era, physically limiting, personally demeaning and psychologically humiliating. Although we were social outcasts, we permitted this disgrace to reach us only as far as our front door. Within our gates we tried to maintain a decent life. My father designed a new home for us with many modern conveniences, and if we trusted God, He would help us. We waited for a better dawn, but for us, dawn was the glow of embers in the ruins of Europe.

The owner of a big dry goods store, Father lived by three principles: First, honesty. During the pre-Nazi era, his reputation earned him the trust of the population. Second, charity. He practiced two major kinds of charity: giving without the recipient's knowledge, or giving funds to help someone start his own business with pride and self-confidence intact. Third, he believed in a good sense of humor. According to Father, the Nobel Prize should be awarded to the person who makes the most people laugh. When I was a child, I felt that Father deserved the prize for the funny anecdotes and jokes he told, for the pranks he perpetrated each year on April Fool's Day, and the way he could cheer up anyone who needed encouragement.

Father also had been a military man, before, during and after World War I. He was wounded in action and received decorations for bravery. He also raised us with military discipline. We had to exercise each morning and participate in sports as well.

A man of varied talents and skills, Father enjoyed several hobbies, such as bookbinding, photography, and carpentry. Most of the villagers benefited from his activities. He had been the founder and president of the local Sports Club, and the Merchant's Association. Father brought live theater to the community and was active at the school board of our synagogue. He loved to do crossword puzzles and manufactured his own cigarettes from imported paper and mixed .

imported tobacco.

Father was proud to be Hungarian. He put his trust in the justice of his countrymen who would know how far they should go with pleasing the Nazis.

Mother, the queen of our Jewish home, was gentle and kind not only to us children, but to the children of other homes. Despite the food rationing, frequently some stranger was eating at my mother's kitchen. Her very busy, weather-beaten, wicker basket would be packed with food and sent along to some needy family.

In her earlier years, Mother had worked diligently at our store. Later she stayed mostly at home. She taught our loyal maid, Marishka, how to run the household smoothly. And she taught me everything necessary to oversee what Marishka had done. "*You* have to learn how to work properly before you can judge the others," Mother would say to me.

Somehow, she found extra time to be creative. While sitting in the garden, she painted in oil, preserving the flowers on milk glass. Mother also loomed carpets, knitted, crocheted and did other handiwork. I would always remember the doll clothes she made. Most of all, she loved to play the violin.

Father refused to reveal the sorrows and disappointments he encountered outside of our home. Enjoying his protective frame, we lived in guarded security, unaware that murderers were hiding in the dark corners, waiting to spring at a given sign, to clasp their filthy hands around our throats and strangle us with pleasure.

My brother Emery, five years older than I, died of a misdiagnosed illness at the age of twenty. From that time on Mother buried herself emotionally, taking shots and pills and spending much of her time in bed. She was deeply religious, but even God Himself could not heal her grief, she often would say, smiling at us through a veil of private pain.

Mother was preoccupied with grief. Sometimes she could put it aside,

temporarily at least, as she greeted Father when he walked through the door. She no longer entertained guests, and for the sake of the relatives who came to visit, she would put up a good front. Mother pretended to be well. I knew she wasn't, and neither was Father. We all pretended.

Our lovely house was not a haven anymore. I would lie awake in the black silence of my room, uncertain, unsure, trying to sort things out. When the walls began to close in on me, I rushed to the rabbi who had been my mentor. As Father said, "My children, surround yourselves with scholars."

Rabbi Stern, who had no children of his own, was an extremely well-educated scholar, with a doctorate in philosophy. I admired him for knowing the Holy Books by heart, and he could speak English fluently. I approached him frequently with questions.

"Where is God now? Who is going to win the war if the people on both sides pray for victory?"

"God is always here within you," he responded. "The nations with the biggest guns will win the war."

As he saw his flock abused, the rabbi had his own sorrows. He too was waiting in the shade. Perhaps he had more strength than the most of us.

In 1942, I was seventeen years old. I groped for help any place I could find it. I turned to my mother's youngest sister, Margit, for some kind of direction. Margit's husband Sandor, had been among the first to be taken into the Jewish Forced Labor Corps. Aunt Margit spoke about her feelings and fears, and the love she was missing. She even went far into her intimacies, explaining only vaguely what it meant to miss her husband physically. This I couldn't grasp.

I was wrestling with more immediate and personal changes of late adolescence. I wanted to be a grown-up but I was still somewhat immature. I wished to experience the world which I viewed with schoolgirl romance, but it was out of my reach. Often I felt imprisoned in my body, in our new house, as

well as in that isolated village. When my brother died, I felt a blade cut into me and slice away many of my expectations. I missed Emery. He was my friend, my partner in many indoor- and outdoor sports. We played chess for hours, attended parties or talked about books we had read. At the time Emery attended school, a limited number of Jews still were allowed to seek higher education. Emery graduated from business college. He learned to design shoes and his artistry was recognized at several levels of the shoe industry. He talked to me about romantic love, the world and life itself. Emery's death brought about great changes in our family, the way each of us lived and how we lived with each other.

Our parents equally protected both of us. After Emery died and new regulations against Jews came into being, Mother and Father became extremely watchful of me, more fearful than ever that I should encounter harm outside of our home. Of course, their reasoning was well-founded. Jews were abused everywhere, but the alarming way Emery died made them oddly frightened of unseen, natural disaster. If they could, they would filter the air for me or smooth the pavement. They were obsessed with contamination, with germs, making sure the house was spotless, forbidding me to eat in places they weren't able to examine. They insisted that I overdress before venturing outdoors. Only for short distances was I allowed to ride my bicycle. Mother even read my books before I did.

I loved them dearly, but for many reasons I wanted to break away. I wanted to rebel. The restrictions imposed upon me for being Jewish, combined with those of my parents, made my life miserable. Father and Mother's expectation of me increased along with their restriction, and I feared that I would disappoint them. I could never measure up to Emery. I felt that Emery, the firstborn, the heir to the throne, was gone, and I was a poor substitute.

Father became brooding and listless. He believed that God had tested him

like He had tested Abraham. Unlike Abraham, however, God had required more of Father — he had to sacrifice his beloved son. The smile, so natural on Father's face, became a rare visitor. There were too many serious, silent moments. Although Father attempted to maintain the serenity of our home, the tension increased.

In my confused state of mind, I yearned for the life of a normal adolescent. I wanted to join youth clubs — it was forbidden. To see movies was forbidden, a college education was forbidden, dancing was forbidden. Mostly, I wanted a boyfriend. But there were no young Jewish men in our village.

For all my dreams of freedom, I rarely could walk on the street without being insulted, hearing some local tough calling me “stinking Jew.” I thought Emery would have known what to do. He was always in control of situations. Of course, times were different when Emery was seventeen. He had more freedom, and he had his girlfriend, Edit, as well.

“My darling child,” Mother would console me, “wait until next year.” She embraced me and held me tight. But there was no reason to believe that next year would be any better. Our radios were confiscated. The laws against us grew like wild mushrooms after the rain in May.

Father said, “They don't kill us like fishes at once, but drain away our water slowly.”

Chapter 2

Later that summer, the village drummer at our street corner announced a ordinance: one member from every household must attend a lecture at the middle school's gymnasium to learn about the new air raid regulations. My parents decided to send me.

Before the session, I met several of my former classmates. They greeted me as if I were some kind of sick person, who never will get well.

I listened as Aranka, a tall, shapely, blond girl, boast about her latest triumphs with an air force officer. She felt sorry for me, she said, and wondered how I could stand living without a boyfriend. Smarting inside, I smiled and told her I had plenty of time. But after the air raid session, I rushed over to the home of Eta Roth, my best friend since first grade, to commiserate.

Eta, a frail, quiet person was equally burdened as I with fear and uncertainty, but she accepted her unjust lot without bitterness, without complaining of the misfortune our generation had to endure.

I told her about Aranka, but Eta said simply that the kind of affairs Aranka was so proud of, was not for us. We should be looking for a deeper, more permanent relationship. I knew she meant "love."

I had jotted down fragments of my own ideas of romantic love in a notebook which I hid behind my bookshelf. These were youthful, innocent fantasies that should have been reality but during our years of misery, they only remained fiction.

Naturally, I thought that I fell in love with Tibor the first day I met him. This became an especially big problem, not only because of my fancy and romantic notions, but because Tibor was a Christian.

I met him on a balmy, sultry fall morning in 1942. It was Friday, market day, shortly

after our store had opened for business. In checking the cash drawer, our cashier, Miss Veres, teased Father that he had given all the change to the beggars, who appeared frequently at the door. (Miss Veres used to work every day, but since the restrictions against Jewish merchants had severely limited our merchandise, Father needed her only on market days and before holidays.)

As Father opened the safe and put some paper notes into a little steel suitcase, he told me to carry the cash to the bank or post office for smaller change.

I strolled down Wekerle Street, the main thoroughfare leading to the market square, passing dozens of booths and stands that comprised the village's open air market. I can never forget the sheer physical beauty of that day.

The moist air was thick with the fragrance of fresh fruits and vegetables, succulent aromas from crates of purple plums and melons, and mounds of sweet, table grapes. Happy bees hovered over baskets of fall peaches, apples and pears, great, red tomatoes, green peppers, braided onions and garlic, stacked jars of fresh honey, huge cucumbers, and carrots, tilted boxes of giant cabbages, chunks of butter wrapped in wet rhubarb leaves, garden flowers and wildflowers, gathered in bunches, all for sale.

Tanks full of fresh, live fish stood near the sacks of potatoes. The wind from the valley circulated the combined smells between the crates of chickens, ducks and geese. The marketplace was loud with the cacophony of sellers and buyers trying to strike their bargains.

The people were so involved with the market that nobody bothered me as I sauntered along. Not hearing any slur or insult from even the most radical peasant, I was grateful for the bounty that earth had given to brighten the day. By the time I reached the post office I was in a merry, almost festive mood.

I had expected old Mr. Nagy at the deposit window, and was surprised to find a tall, very serious man I guessed to be in his early 20s. His skin was much darker than most of the local population, and his thick, black hair and high cheekbones gave him an almost Oriental appearance, enhanced by his slightly-slanted eyes.

I asked for some change and handed him the little suitcase. As he opened it and took out the money, his face was somber as he counted the large bills. He kept glancing at my hands on the windowsill between us. Counting out the rolls of coins, he placed them in the suitcase. Then he gazed at me pensively as if mulling over something on his mind. His dark face finally lit up with a warm, spontaneous smile.

“Are you going to carry this all by yourself?” he asked.

“Of course not,” I retorted, quickly accepting his challenge. “I have two elves waiting for me with a coach.” And that was all.

Offering to do all my father’s errands, I returned to the post office frequently. As this had been the job of our clerk, Miss Farkas, she soon suspected what was transpiring, but she waited for me to open up first.

Actually, there was very little I could tell her, until the day our neighbor and seamstress, Miss Varro, asked me over to try on a dress she was making for me. I had been working in the garden with Mr. Demeter, our gardener, and I was covered with mud. Miss Varro was in a hurry and allowed me time only to wash my hands before dragging me over to her house. She led me into her workshop, pinned a sleeve to the dress I wore, held me by the wrist, and asked me to follow her into the living room. As we entered, I saw Tibor standing at the window. I became so nervous I pulled back with such force that the pins tore into the fabric.

Per custom, Miss Varro introduced us. Tibor made a remark, but I, utterly flustered, barely heard what he said. I could only think how terrible to finally meet this way face-to-face, and I was so dirty. We talked for a short while and then said good-bye. I ran back to my gardening with such enthusiasm that Mr. Demeter remarked I would dig myself down to China.

I hurried to the post office often, just to steal a few minutes with Tibor. I listened, entranced, as he told me small parts of his life, his ideas, his strong convictions of the power of the human will and, of course, his troubled thoughts about the condition of our world. Having never known anyone like him, I was completely spellbound. Before

long we were meeting along the secluded forest paths of the Chain Castle garden, or anywhere else we weren't likely to be noticed. These secret rendezvous created a sense of story like romance and deepening mystery which drew me closer to him.

Tibor, a young intellectual, bemoaned that his studies in Budapest had been interrupted by the war. He had been drafted into the army, but luckily his political connections kept him out of service. Assigned to a factory manufacturing airplane parts, he still dreaded his job for he believed it helped to drag out the war he despised. After working three months at the factory, the same political influence arranged for him to work at the post office, but he had to report regularly for a medical examination.

To me, Tibor was extremely worldly, wise, and more sophisticated than anyone I had ever known, capable of doing whatever he wanted to do. And he was interested in me, in all my thoughts. Without being unduly inquisitive he dug deeper into the layers of my conscience where I dared not look myself. Likewise, I asked him an endless amount of questions regarding his life. One day he told me he was an atheist which was difficult for me to understand as I was being reared in a profoundly religious environment. The reasons behind his beliefs turned out to be complex and full of harsh edges.

Tibor's natural father was the politically powerful Catholic bishop. He had used religion to trick a young, innocent countrywoman. To Tibor, the bishop was a traitor. Yet Tibor needed him, and yearned for the day when he no longer required his help to keep out of the war.

Tibor was a loner with an unreachable soul, whose warmth would disappear when he felt someone was reaching in too closely. He dressed terribly, owned nothing, ate little and spent most of his money on books. I clung to him although he kept me at a distance. Yet he would shower me with his vast knowledge seeped from books on psychology and philosophy. Tibor called me "Dew Drop," explaining that the dew sparkled in the morning, giving moisture to the greenery, but dies from the sunshine. I felt confused, because I couldn't see myself dying from warmth and glow.

The more I learned about him, the greater the mystery, and the more my attraction intensified.

In a small place like ours, one of the chief joys and entertainment of the bored population was to spread gossip. Thus I realized it would be impossible to keep my parents ignorant of our relationship. Someone would talk about us sooner or later. Therefore, I told my parents about Tibor. Naturally, their reaction was predictable.

Father bluntly refused to permit me to see him. "Now when Jews are hated so deeply, it is wrong for you to love our enemy," he said. Standing up for Tibor, I tried explaining how he hated our enemies too. I also brought up my Aunt Ella, Mother's sister, who had married a Christian, and I pointed out that Uncle Ignatz was loved by our family. I just about won their reluctant approval, until I foolishly let it slip that Tibor wasn't really religious, that he was an atheist. In the eyes of my parents, this was worse than being a *goy*, a gentile. Father was livid with rage, while Mother absorbed the information quietly, looking hurt in her disappointment.

For a few days, I was unbearably miserable and implacable to handle. Mother felt bad and suggested perhaps we should give our relationship a chance. Maybe with some guidance and understanding Tibor could be saved.

Tibor and I continued seeing each other secretly, until the weather turned much colder and his threadbare overcoat could not keep him warm. He became ill.

His landlady, a close friend of Aunt Ella, called frantically, saying Tibor was in a terrible way, and refused to see the Christian doctor. Setting differences aside, Mother packed up a basket of light food. Since Dr. Berren, our family doctor, was out of town, Mother called the other Jewish physician, Dr. Molnar. Mother told me to get ready to see Tibor. Perhaps she reasoned, if someone in the distant city where Emery had worked, would have done the same for him, he might still be alive today.

We arrived at Tibor's apartment only a few moments after Dr. Molnar had examined him. The doctor told us it was safe to see him. Ever since childhood, I dreaded to enter a sickroom and since Emery's death, my fear had intensified. Mother

had to nudge me to step inside. Scared to look around, I just walked to his bed and shook his hand. Mother left us alone.

The way Tibor gazed at me with his deep, dark, suffering eyes, I thought it would make him feel better if I kissed him. He sensed my intentions as I bent down toward him, and laughed.

“Oh, you silly Dew Drop, don’t you know if you would kiss me, my temperature would rise?”

From that day on, Tibor was allowed to see me. The first time he called at our house, Mother was polishing her neglected violin. Tibor asked if he could play. Mother handed him the violin. He put it to his chin, closed his eyes, and played “La Paloma” from the American movie, *Juarez*.

When he finished, Mother applauded, but I stared at him with awe as if he were a god of music. That same day, Mother played a slow Gypsy melody .

When Father arrived, they talked about war, in general, and the wasted energy men expend in hate and senseless slaughter of people. Father even told Tibor one of his favorite anecdotes about a German and a Russian shoemaker who accidentally landed in the same foxhole, and were unable to kill each other because they had so many things in common.

Just as I became elated with my parents’ attitude, Tibor’s suddenly changed. He became as cold as the season itself. Sometimes he was quiet to the point of not talking at all. I would try to bring him out of what appeared to be in a temporary, depressed state. He refused. Thinking whatever was hurting him, eventually would leave him, I waited. It didn’t happen that way.

During the last week of November, we strolled down Chestnut Lane in the bare, storm-torn garden of Chain Castle.

After a long silence, Tibor said, “I have to return to Budapest. I won’t be able to see you again.”

“Must you?”

“Are you too naive to understand, even if the Bishop could arrange my return, our relationship has to end. It’s no good,” he said, shaking his head. “It never was any good. What future could we possibly have? There is no place for us to go.” Speaking rapidly, he continued, “You don’t know how I struggled, how terrible this whole situation has made me feel. At times, I resent you.”

My tears were gathering, and I tried to hold them back, yet they poured from my eyes, down my face, to my coat. I turned away. I didn’t want him to see that I was crying. But he was looking away, at the trees.

In that terrible pause, the words tore out of me faster than I could think.

“Is it so bad to love a Jew?”

His shoulders hunched as if he had been hit. He turned toward me. “No, it’s not bad to love a Jew. Still, what kind of a future could we have?”

“Are you afraid of me? Of course you are.”

“Don’t be silly. How could I be?”

“You are afraid of my family? Of other people accepting us?”

“Now you are sillier than ever. You know I ignore what other people think. No, please, believe me, it’s nothing like that.” He came closer, and held me as tightly as he could without hurting me. “It’s the Nazis, it’s me. I have nothing to offer.”

“Will I see you again?”

“I doubt it though there is always a chance. Something might happen. The war might end, things might get better. I don’t know. You must believe me, and trust me. That’s all I can say.”

Still confused, still trying to sort out what he was saying, for an instant I feared he had met someone else. Because of the war, there were few young men left in the village. But then he kissed me, and I realized he was telling the truth. The root of the problem was not that simple, and I felt ashamed for even thinking it.

It was getting darker. And the darkness was also in us.

I leaned against a tree. The wind grew noticeably colder. He walked away. I stood

there feeling as if I was robbed of the one thing that made a difference in my life. Terribly afraid in the fallen darkness, I bolted and ran toward home, not pausing, not looking after him, wishing that I could run forever.

When I finally arrived home, I flung myself inside and slammed the kitchen door behind me. Leaning against the door, I tried to catch my breath. But before I could, I heard Father calling me in a worried voice. No doubt a lecture was coming about returning home late. Feeling resentful and angry, I wanted to be left alone.

I walked toward my parents' room in sulking obedience, bracing myself for a reprimand. What came after was far worse, having nothing to do with the broken rules of the house.

"It's your Uncle Sandor," my father whispered, approaching me as I stood in the open doorway. "He has been reported missing on the Russian Front."

I saw Mother, sitting quietly on the couch, comforting Aunt Margit, her distraught sister, who was married to Uncle Sandor. My eleven-year-old, blond, blue-eyed cousin, Lacko, sat near the window, winding the bottom seam of the curtain around his finger.

"They don't care," Margit sobbed, her head rocking on my mother's shoulder. "He is only another Jewish slave to them. They know he is lost, and they won't even try to find him!"

I wanted to console her but no words seemed to be right. I stood staring in the open doorway, as stunned as my father. In the next moment, Mother frowned slightly and waved her head, signaling me to go away. I gently touched my aunt's shoulder and disappeared toward my room as quickly as I had come. There, Uncle Sandor came into my mind.

Sandor was serving in the Jewish Forced Labor Corps practically since its inception in 1940. As a Jew, he had to wear civilian clothes and a yellow arm band. He was forbidden to carry any weapon, only a shovel to clean up the mess after the

regular soldiers. Because he first was stationed in Hungary, it was bearable and he was able to spend time at home. But in 1941, when Hungary fought Russia as a German ally, the Jewish Forced Labor Corps was ordered to accompany the Hungarian Army into battle to perform servile and dangerous tasks. Among their required duties were cleaning latrines, and searching for live land mines on the battlefields, going ahead of the regular army as shields to be sacrificed, to be expended as decoys to flush out snipers. The Jews were nothing more than human targets for abuse and slaughter. Not surprisingly, none returned from the Eastern Russian Front.

Alone in my room, I imagined my uncle's body, discarded like one -out shoe near some lake in Ukraine, in a place one thousand kilometers from anything, unknown even as a scratch of a pencil on a faded military map. His outstretched hands would receive nothing but snow and ice. Indifferent Hungarian and German soldiers would pass him by without the slightest concern.

I remembered Uncle Sandor, whose sweet voice had filled the synagogue even on simple Sabbath mornings. I thought of Uncle Sandor, the instigator of many joyful happenings when joy seemed to be evaporating from our vocabulary. I thought of Margit who might never feel his loving embrace again. And I thought of Lacko, how difficult for him to understand the reason why his father was selected to be the one missing.

Suddenly it occurred to me that Uncle Harry, my mother's brother, too, would possibly be sent to Russia's barren, hostile plains without as much as a stone to defend himself. What comfort could I give to my mother? How could I persuade her to stop crying?

The whole day seemed to fall on me. My tears erupted again, my mind racing with thoughts about my uncles, my parents, the Germans, the Jews, the war, and of course, my proud Christian-atheist, who had deserted me at the worst time. For a

moment, I hated Tibor, hated him deeply and completely. But as I raked over all he had said that day about our impossible future, I recalled the Third Jewish Law with shocking reality. The law prohibited intermarriages between Jews and other people, and I realized perhaps Tibor wasn't to be blamed after all. He was only telling me the unwanted, ugly truth. I lay on the sofa in total silence, trying to understand how to bear the burden and still remain intact. I lay there wondering, wondering what else fate was measuring out for us.

Tibor left on the anniversary date of my brother, Emery's death. I refused to go to the post office from then on.

Three days later, a letter arrived from my father's sister who lived in Garla. Aunt Ilonka wrote that the local police had ransacked the home of her two sons, and seized a book on basic English grammar. Gyuri and Tamas were arrested and jailed without trial. They were charged with spying for the British.

Right away Mother, my own teacher of English, grabbed my English grammar book. At nightfall, she climbed the high stairs of our attic and hid the book beneath the wooden beams. She acted so calmly that she even washed her hands afterwards. But then she broke down, and cried.

That same night, our Christian neighbor, Mrs. Mezak, a midwife, reported on the latest news of the British Broadcast Corporation (BBC) radio broadcast. She had done this ever since our radio had been confiscated. The news supplied us with encouragement. Broadcasting to the downtrodden, the BBC asked us not to give up hope. Overcome by emotion, this was the only occasion Mother walked out on Mrs. Mezak.

Still reeling with the horror of my cousins' imprisonment, we learned that Father's two brothers, one within days of the other, were suddenly fired from their jobs for no other reason than for being Jewish. They searched frantically for work, but no one would hire them. My father assumed their and their families' support.

Early in December the government announced more bad news for us. Jews no longer could slaughter animals in the kosher manner. Grandfather, a butcher, saw his income plunge almost to nothing. He could barely earn a living by buying and selling eggs, and renting his facilities. For most of us, the taste of fresh kosher meat became simply a memory.

In January 1943, the Jews were deprived of their voting rights. On January 13, Aunt Margit rushed into our house just after breakfast, trembling like the aftershock of an earthquake. She fanned a badly-folded sheet of paper.

“Now we know it,” she cried. “This confirms it!”

Most of the Jews forced to accompany the Hungarian Second Army into Russia had been slaughtered. Uncle Sandor was one of the casualties. Father put out his cigarette with such force that the ashtray tilted. He placed his hands over his forehead, and cried.

Chapter 3

Later in January, we were informed that our house was too large for a small Jewish family, and therefore the local authorities would assign, at their own discretion, someone to move in with us. There was no way Father could block the intrusion to our home. As an obedient citizen and a gracious host, he told us to accept the intruder as if he were a guest.

Our boarder turned out to be a conceited old fool. General Jenö Parkay was a pompous braggart and ill-mannered. He kept his nose up high as he walked into our yard, stepping up the stairs like a circus horse. As he sucked in his stomach, his heavy sword snagged on a clump of ice and banged clumsily on his knees. The general introduced himself without the customary handshake. He flashed his requisition papers and superciliously commanded to be shown to his room, sniffing at this and snarling at that, peering down his nose suspiciously at everything.

"He's awful," Marishka declared in a whisper just as soon as the door closed behind the man.

"He is probably harmless," I said. "He looks old enough to be a grandfather."

"Water, somebody bring me fresh water, that dog urine in the pitcher is stale. Do you people hear me?" The general's voice bellowed.

Mother gasped for air. I looked at the floor. Father swallowed in anger, while Marishka, her great blue eyes wide with apprehension, her full lips taut with worry, hurriedly left to cool the general's mood.

"He is no gentleman and he is a disgrace to the army," Father declared.

"Please, dear, calm down. It could have been worse. They could have assigned a German."

Then we heard a frightening, high-pitched shriek, and Marishka came running in, her eyes bigger than dinner plates. "He pinched me," she cried in astonishment, easing her left hand around her tender buttocks.

"He did what?" I asked in innocent disbelief.

"That crazy old fool," Father banged his fist on the kitchen table as if he were hitting the general's head. "I won't tolerate this in my house."

Mother's face flushed red. "What are you going to do?" she asked.

"Rest assured, I will handle him with great diplomacy." He patted Mother on the shoulder and left the room.

The three of us waited in the kitchen quietly. Mother was the perfect picture of tolerant worry as she sat with her hands folded in her lap and gazed straight at the door. Marishka, a good Catholic, crossed herself at least half a dozen times in prayer to the Virgin Mary.

"I wish we could throw him out," I sighed impatiently.

Father returned with an expression of calm satisfaction on his face. "It's taken care of," he said. "I think the old goat won't be any problem from now on."

Father would never reveal his secret of taming the fool. However, the fool didn't stay tamed for long. At our house he acted peacefully, but once outside he blabbered the most insulting anti-Semitic remarks he could conjure.

The general was fond of our local wine and couldn't have enough of it. In civilian life, he had been a well-paid clerk but the army paid him poorly. When he discovered that our cellar held barrels full of wine that Father had accepted from the peasants unable to pay their bills, the general made plans to filch some wine. Not brought up in a wine-growing country, he was unfamiliar with the use of a glass winestealer. While standing on a chair, trying to siphon some wine from the biggest barrel he slipped and fell, breaking the glass in his hands. He was lucky he didn't kill himself on the shattered glass.

No one could avoid smiling when he emerged from his room the following

morning, bubbling something about slipping on the ice.

“What are we going to do?” Marishka asked.

“We’ll act like nothing has happened, like we don’t even know that he broke the winestealer,” Father exclaimed. “I have a plan.”

He filled a large demijohn with wine and took it to the general, saying it was “officer’s choice.” From that day on, the general stopped spewing malice. Rather he followed Father around the house, remarking on the brave Jewish soldiers he knew in World War One.

Unfortunately, this phase was short-lived. The general then focused his attention on me. One day, when I was watering the plants in the hallway leading to his room, he sneaked behind me, his steps muted by a pair of socks with a hole in each of the toes. As I was bending down he leaned over and kissed me on the neck.

I was so startled that I dropped the watering can and the water spilled all over the floor.

“I know you want me,” the old fool sputtered, saliva spraying from his wine-smelling mouth.

“The devil wants you,” I shouted and ran out of the room. I stopped at our door, wondering how could I tell anyone about this. My father would take out his old bayonet he kept in a closet in our storage room, near his uniform, and surely would use it.

I was pleased when Eta visited me. In my room we could hear the general’s heavy boots clumping on the hallway floor as he returned to his room. Before opening the door he would pause, loudly clear his throat, and begin talking to himself in a great, hollow, pompous tone, as if he were carrying on some kind of imagined public speech. We just had to giggle.

“He is practicing his victory speech,” I commented lightly. “You know he is going to win the war all by himself.”

“We laugh, but you see, he is a real threat to our people.”

“And to me,” I said and told her about the kissing incident, asking what she would

do if such a thing ever happened to her.

“There is nothing I would do, just try to get out of his way. After all, he could cause a mountain full of troubles for the family.”

“But he is already causing trouble.”

“All right, I’ll tell you what. The next time he does anything nasty, go ahead and slap his face. Surely he would refrain from bragging about such treatment.”

I was debating her advice, but before she left, I promised Eta I would do just that. I accompanied Eta on her way home as far as our store when I saw our old mailman, Joska.

“This is for you, child,” Joska shouted and handed me a bundle of mail for our business.

I stood at the street corner, flipping through the mail. At first seeing nothing but business letters and my father’s favorite crossword puzzle magazine, I suddenly stared in disbelief at a slim, gray envelope, recognizing Tibor’s handwriting.

Over the past few months I missed Tibor, and began to wonder if he ever existed. Maybe he was just someone I had invented to escape the continuing upheaval in our lives. At times, I would run my fingers over the covers of the books he had given me, feeling both relieved and frustrated. Tibor existed somewhere, out of my reach and now here was the proof that he was thinking of me, that my name did have some meaning for him, that he would tell me the things I was craving to hear.

I stuffed the envelope into my pocket and ran into the store to hand the mail to Father who sat by the fire. As he looked up at me from beneath his reading glasses, I turned away, fearing he would sense the great excitement that was waiting to be explored inside my pocket.

I withdrew into his office and at the window I tore open the envelope, at first running my eyes over the lines, not even trying to read. Then I read each line, savoring each word. It was a long letter.

He didn’t apologize for his long silence. Instead, he simply explained that he had

tried unsuccessfully to forget me. Self-discipline failed to erase my face and he had no choice but to write, which was clearly against his better judgment. Yes, he did miss me, but the letter contained no sentimental reference to the past, nothing gentle or romantic. He hoped I would be receptive about hearing from him, but if not, he would understand.

When he returned to Budapest, he wrote, his worst suspicions were verified. The draft board was after him again. Then old Papa Bishop interceded once more and Tibor was stashed away in a factory making airplane parts.

“At least you’re not making bombs,” remarked the Bishop. According to Tibor that was the most sensible thing he had uttered over the past ten years.

The next paragraph puzzled me. Tibor said that he had visited the grave of his stepfather, who had raised him, but he never would go back there again. This was a strange, cold thing to write. What was gnawing at Tibor’s soul to reject someone so close to him? I could only guess he never forgave his stepfather for not taking revenge on the Bishop.

Writing further, Tibor told me about his happy reunion with Dr. Celle, a young physician at a large hospital in Budapest who was in charge of the medical needs of the factory workers where Tibor had worked. They were close friends. Dr. Celle supplied Tibor with books, which in turn reached my shelves. Curiously, although he said much about Celle, I felt there was something missing, something Tibor was deliberately avoiding.

In this letter, Tibor wrote a few lines about a political experience the two had participated in. He revealed no details, only that it was enlightening and invigorating, and wished my father could have been present. This puzzled me as the only thing Father and Tibor agreed upon was the futility of war. I surmised it had to do with a specific kind of involvement and I resented that it wedged itself into my romance.

The letter included Tibor’s address as if he wanted to make sure I would write to him, but then he wrote he would understand if I were too busy to reply.

I saw him being alone and lonely, and wanted nothing more than to hear from him again as soon as possible.

The letter ended with *Love* scratched out, replaced by *Yours*. Either way I was pleased, as I was both.

I kissed the bottom of the page, folded it gently and placed it into the pocket of my working outfit. I drifted through the day as if carrying a glowing charcoal.

That night I crawled up in my soft armchair, read the letter again and decided to answer without delay. His reply came shortly after. I felt as if I had been given a special gift that no one else could share, a special prize that no one had ever won. It helped and shielded me, and the violence around me otherwise became pale and weak. For the rest of February, I was extraordinarily happy. I liked everyone, including the old general; I even was ready to forgive his stupidity. Unfortunately he mistook my politeness for romantic attraction which erupted in comic error when he unexpectedly was to be transferred to another post. The Hungarian army was very secretive about its business, and we were unaware that the old general was moving out only until two hours before he actually did.

He clumped into the kitchen while we were having lunch, cleared his throat and with great seriousness, announced: "I have bad news for you."

Even though bad news was an everyday visitor, who stayed on, we still expected a shock. Simultaneously we all stopped moving. We were like a motion picture halted in a single frame. After the pause, Mother put her hands on her chest, and Father dabbed his lips with the napkin, possibly to muffle a grunt.

"What is the bad news?" I asked.

"Get hold of yourselves. I'm leaving now."

It took a few seconds until his words penetrated, then everyone spoke at once.

"You are leaving today?" Father questioned with relief.

"How soon will you be going?" Mother asked, trying not to appear too anxious.

"You mean you are going, and never coming back?" I queried with obvious

delight.

"I don't understand," Marishka said and raised her arms. "What is the bad news?"

The general ignored her obviously happy question and the broad smile neither Marishka nor I could hide. He pulled in his fat belly and boasted of his capabilities to halt the barbarians before they set foot on our sacred soil.

Father said we appreciated his effort, and wished him luck.

From the door the general said that a new gentleman, who would be taking his room, would be arriving that same day.

The joy we had from the news of his departure vanished quickly.

"Seldom comes better," Father quoted the German adage and left the house.

Mother adjourned to take her afternoon rest.

The general called Marishka for the last time. I kidded her that he was going to give her a tip for her good services. Marishka returned in a few minutes, all roused up, mumbling words she spoke only at times when she was beyond herself.

"Did he pinch you again?" I asked.

"Not this time. He asked if I wanted to advance my career and become a servant in a good Christian home."

"What did you tell him?"

"I told him I wished the first Russian bullet would hit him in his fat belly." She smiled and rubbed the palms of her hands together as if she had completed a good business deal.

An hour later, a carriage arrived at our gate. A skinny private trampled up the stairs and not knowing which entrance he should approach, he knocked at our door.

Father already had left for the store. Mother was relaxing, and when Marishka saw the soldier she ran into her room and closed the door behind her.

I opened the door and led him toward the entrance to the front room. The general came out, acknowledged the soldier's salute and pointed toward his two very worn suitcases. The private picked them up and left in a hurry. I expected the general to

follow him, but he tarried at the doorway.

“Good-bye, General,” I said and turned around, ready to leave.

“How about a handshake for a soldier who will keep this land safe for you?” he sasked in a throaty voice.

Being happy to see him leave, I held out my hand. He grabbed it and pulled me close. I was wedged between his body and the door.

A husky gurgle rolled out of his throat and he lunged at me like an enraged beast. I could smell the foul stench of his wine-soaked mouth. Suddenly I remembered the advice Eta had given me, and with all my strength, I slapped his puffy face. He stiffened with shock. I grabbed the chance and tore myself away. Running out the door, I practically knocked over a man who stood there holding a small valise.

It was obvious that he had witnessed the disgraceful event, but it was too late for regrets. I just wanted to disappear.

As I ran through the corridor, I could taste the old general's soggy, wet lips as if they were some gruesome, fatal poison, as if they were the lips of some big rat that had kissed and bitten me in a vile pleasure.

Marishka was already in the kitchen. She looked at me with quizzing eyes, then she pulled the curtain aside. “Thank God, he is gone,” she said.

I asked Marishka to tell Mother that I was going to Eta's house. I dressed quickly and left. The driver of a carriage saw me pass by and asked if he could give me a ride. I shook my head. I wanted to feel the cold wind against my face and I wanted to trample my feet violently into the snow. Hurrying to Eta's house as fast as my body would allow, I had to stop once in awhile and spit onto the frozen street and wipe my mouth with a handkerchief.

Eta was working a new trade. She made brooches and pins out of scrap leather to be sold to a dress shop in the city of Feherwar. She was holding an instruction sheet.

“Cursed be these Germans,” she mumbled.

"What is it?" I asked and leaned over her shoulder.

She explained that the store had given her the wrong instruction sheet. It was written in German.

I offered to help her translate as I had been taking private lessons for many years. (In school, I would do Eta's German homework and she would do mathematics for me.)

To her father's dismay, Eta never learned to speak German, and to my father's sorrow, my mathematical skills were not what he expected of a future businesswoman.

After the German crisis had been settled, I told Eta about my bitter victory over the general.

She listened quietly, engulfed by her own rage.

"It makes me sick," Eta said. "And what have you to look forward to? Another so-called boarder and more of the same. One pig leaves the trough and another comes to take his fill."

"I know, but what is there to do?"

"I know what I'm going to do. I'm going to move to Palestine as soon as it will be safe. No pig is going to push his filthy snout through my door. I keep telling you, but you won't listen."

"They don't all hate us," I said.

"You can think what you want. No Jew could ever be free anywhere unless there is a country Jews could really claim for their own."

Eta picked up a piece of green leather and a pair of scissors and began the tedious job of making an alligator.

Although my father gave financial support regularly to the Holy Land, he believed, that as a good patriot, his allegiance first belonged to Hungary. At an early age I was taught to include Hungary into my daily prayers.

It made no sense to argue with Eta. As I walked home, "Seldom comes better," repeated itself in my head like an endless refrain in a very wise song. Whatever ugly thing would happen next I naturally assumed would be connected with the new

boarder, whose name I was yet to learn.

Even so I knew that life is only partially predictable.

A ball that rolls downhill gains momentum as it hurries along, and when hitting a stone, it bounces and continues rolling in an unpredictable direction.

Chapter 4

On the way home I tried to imagine what it would be like to live in a Jewish country where we would be first-class citizens, and nobody could make laws to deprive us of our human rights. Eta was right; that would be a place for us. Then I thought how strongly Mother believed that someday soon, God will intervene on behalf of the Jewish people and life would return to normal. I doubted it would ever be the same for me. I was young and demanded my freedom. I had never known even one year without hate. Eta had to be right.

As I walked through my gate, I saw a freight wagon parked in front of the storage room which we called room eleven, on account of the number on the key chain. I wasn't sure, but it seemed like two husky men, nonchalantly were carrying toward the same open door, ghastly, stiff, nude pink people, who had no arms or legs, I rushed inside in horrified panic, in disbelief, until I recognized those eerie human figures as the store's mannequins that we used to display merchandise. I laughed for being so silly, and proceeded toward the stairway.

Marishka stood at the door, gesturing frantically. "Come here quickly, please," she whispered.

Whatever made her uneasy, surely must have been connected with the new boarder, I thought. Setting the table for dinner, Marishka's hands shook as she handled the plates.

It was too early for Father to return from the store, so I was shocked when I heard his deep voice booming behind the bedroom door.

"Please, Marishka," I said with a shaky voice, "try to tell me calmly what miserable thing has happened now."

“I’m so upset, and worried, and I’m so sorry,” she answered.

“What did the new boarder do?”

“Oh, no, it is not Mr. Kertes. He has nothing to do with it. It’s your store, dear. Right after lunch, your father was in the store only for five minutes when an official came in with some kind of document or note. I missed some of the details, but it was an order to give up part of your store and your father had to move everything right away. They will begin the partitioning first thing in the morning. I’m so worried; why don’t they leave us alone?’

“How upset is Father, Marishka? That’s what worries me. He is more important than the store.”

Obviously, that was a foolish question. I could hear him shouting through the door.

“How about Mother?”

“Thank God for your mother. She accepted the bad news very well. She is thankful that the rest of the store is still yours. She is trying to settle him down. She is an amazing woman. God has given her a great strength, and we should all be grateful.”

Father opened the door. “What bothers me is that Miss Pish will sell merchandise forbidden for us to sell, and people will know about it soon enough. They are going to stay away from our store altogether. Until now, if the customers didn’t find what they originally were looking for, they would buy something else that was still available.”

“That hussy surely will ruin our business,” I said.

The three of them looked at me as if I had smashed the porcelain soup tureen. Then Father smiled.

“So you know about Miss Pish’s reputation?”

“Yes, I know. She was the one who set her eyes on Mrs. Kohen’s vineyard and with a snap of her finger she acquired it.”

This time Mother laughed too. Marishka blushed and turned to the stove. "She did more than snap her finger."

It suddenly dawned on me that what Miss Pish did had something to do with sex, my parents' forbidden topic of discussion in front of me and, as I remember, in front of Emery as well. They never told me even the most basic things. When I was small, I quickly learned not to ask questions. As I grew older, I became increasingly more puzzled. How was I to learn about life? One day when my cousin Zsuzsi visited from Budapest, we talked about a pregnant cat. She explained. How strange it sounded to me. She said I should believe her as it was her mother who told her how humans and animals were born.

Now I hoped my parents would change the subject, but they didn't.

"It makes sense." Mother's face took on a look of satisfaction. "There are many people in the village, even though they are Nazis, who believe in some of the old-fashioned morals. We could count on them to patronize our store."

Mother's reasoning convinced Father and he said, "How about some soup?"

After dinner my parents took their customary after-dinner walk and I stayed in the kitchen.

"Let me tell you about our new boarder," Marishka began from behind the dishpan.

I recalled our first introduction, and said, "After Miss Pish I could do without more trouble."

"I know it's hard for you to take what's been dished out to you, but believe me, you should search for something of value in a stranger even if you have been hurt before."

"I'm willing to agree with you, but it's so hard to find it."

"Don't worry, I am not about to say anything unpleasant." Marishka was a simple peasant girl, with an earthy philosophy and passion. If she saw someone cut his or her

finger, she would put her hand over her mouth and cry in pain. Her judgment about people was usually accurate.

“Please, tell me about our new boarder, and make it good. No matter how he turns out, he has to be better than the old general.”

“Oh, yes,” Marishka said in a very serious tone. “He is nothing like that. He is a gentleman of an educated class.” Her face glowed with genuine excitement, and I suspected that in her enthusiasm her first impression might not be completely accurate after all.

She was splashing the sudsy water. “His name is Mr. Kertes. He is an engineer of some sort. He is very polite. He has good manners, good manners. I admit, he isn’t much to look at, but he does have class. I know that means so much. I think he has a little money, too. He wears a new, black wool coat with a real beaver collar. And the way he talks, I think he is from Budapest.”

By the following night after dinner, my parents had misgivings about Mr. Kertes. They hadn’t said anything to me about him before I brought him up in conversation as they were understandably preoccupied with the partitioning of the store. I thought a fresh subject might lighten the mood, although my curiosity was pretty genuine.

“He seems nice enough,” Father said. “but I doubt he is from Budapest. His accent is too strong, too rich. I have never heard such an accent.”

Mother agreed. She thought it was exaggerated and theatrical. During their introduction he hadn’t waited for her to offer her hand, but extended his hand out first. Father remarked perhaps he was nervous.

There was little I could say about the man I had almost knocked over while fleeing from the general. The only thing I knew was what I had overhead through the door. He walked with a light, fast shuffle, and hummed some high-pitched tune miserably off-key.

Mr. Kertes walked in a little later and I had a chance to see him more intently. A skinny, little man, his head barely reached up to my father’s shoulder. He had reddish

brown, short-trimmed hair. Frail-looking and so nervous, he continually twirled the corner of his mustache. I guessed him to be twenty-five-years-old. His youthful face was blemished with pockmarks, the skin cursed with acne, all puffy, red and tender. His lips quivered noticeably, and he talked like an embarrassed actor who forgot his lines.

“Good evening, young lady,” he said with a formal little bow, followed by the ceremonious extension of his hand. “My name is *Mister* Karoly Kertes,” he said, as if he were of noble birth. “I’m an engineer, a very busy one, however, it would be my pleasure to offer you a drink at your convenience.” Instead of waiting for a reply, Mr. Kertes turned on his heels and vanished like a bug that detests the intrusion of light and scurries with great speed into a tiny crack in the wall.

For the next couple of days none of us saw much of Mr. Kertes. He left early in the morning and returned quite late at night. He also worked on weekends. The few times he was around the house during the day he shyly stayed in his room. The only information we received, came from his private valet, a local handyman named Varga, who had been appointed by the authorities.

Mr. Kertes required very little service and Varga had ample time to chat with Marishka in the kitchen. What Marishka learned naturally filtered down to the rest of us. Mr. Kertes was hired by the government, for some secret project, that even Varga was reluctant to talk about. He was not antagonistic to Jews. Varga believe he had met only a few in his life. Kertes was upset by his acne. Every morning he went to the barber for a shave to avoid aggravating it by his own hand. Even that helped very little.

“I have to tell you one thing, but keep it to yourself,” Marishka said as she repeated Varga’s words. “Mr. Kertes isn’t as refined as you might think. He come from a simple peasant family. His father is a day laborer someplace near the Yugoslavian border. I think he only pretends to be of high class. He is ashamed of his humble origin, and you know he has a dozen sisters and brothers who toil the soil with their illiterate parents.”

It was a sad revelation yet, unlike Varga, who was only a step away from illiteracy, we admired Mr. Kertes for trying to better himself, even though we disapproved of his act to deceive us. Again, thinking of Emery, Mother felt sorry for the lonely, young man. She persuaded Father to have a talk with our boarder who lived in a miserable world of deceit.

Father said he would talk to Mr. Kertes, but first to give him a chance to warm up.

Someplace along the way, Mr. Kertes was introduced to our powerful local wine. Like all newcomers, he would drink innocently at first until he found out just who was master over whom. Usually the wine won the contest. Such it was with Mr. Kertes.

Three nights in a row, he came home late, slammed the door and sang so loudly that even in the distant wing of the house from her room, Marishka had heard him.

I stayed awake half the night with the pillow over my ears, hoping he would drop quickly into a deep sleep, but it didn't happen. After a chain of sleepless nights, my father, who was already worn out from the worries of partition, suggested we think of a way to halt this uncivilized intrusion to our needed rest.

"Leave him to me, dear," said Mother, her blue eyes sparkling with mischievous intensity.

The following afternoon, while Father was still at work, Mother asked Marishka and me to bring in a mannequin from room eleven. We picked one with a perfect human face. It didn't have any legs or arms, and it was bald. Mother carried the mannequin into the bathroom, washed it so its color looked like pale pink flesh. She slipped a white nightgown over its body and fluffed a loose scarf on its hairless head, folding the fabric across the forehead which gave a carefree, breeze appearance. We hid the mannequin in my room and covered it with a sheet. Late at night after Father had gone to bed, we stole into Mr. Kertes' room and placed the mannequin carefully in his bed, making it sit in a halfway position.

--Marishka smiled impishly, and said she wished she could see through the wall after Mr. Kertes entered. They left my room and I read for awhile, yet no matter how

much I wanted to stay awake I became drowsy, put away the book, turned off the light and fell asleep.

Later I was awakened by noises, and anxiously anticipated some action. Mr. Kertes stumbled down the hallway and slammed both doors. He was singing, off key, sounding like a sick goat, composing about a sweet-faced lady, "If she could only come into my bed," he sang.

Your wish is coming through sooner than you expected, I thought, snickering. He used the flashlight to find his way in the dark. The beam of light was moving beneath the door. I heard a thud and a painful cry. I sat up in my bed and turned on the light on my night stand. I glanced at the clock; it was one o'clock. Another cry. Was he hurt? Maybe the prank wasn't such a good idea? He dropped the flashlight and kicked it off the carpet. I heard it roll on the parquet floor. Soon I saw the bright light under my door; probably he turned on the chandelier. Noticing the visitor in his bed, he groaned. The doors banged again. He ran out. I surmised he thought he was in the wrong house. I felt amused and turned off the light.

Mr. Kertes returned a few moments later. Cabinet door opened. It had to be the built-in bar. Cork squeaked. I figured that he took another drink to boast his courage.

"Jesus Maria," I heard his voice. "She is dead. Come out, you killer, I got a gun."

I no longer laughed, only shook in fear. Should I knock on his door, or call for help? Suddenly I heard him laugh. I was relieved and slept well until morning.

The next day he made a point to come home earlier, saying that the previous night was the first time he could really laugh at himself. He told us the details of his adventure. I was right in assuming that he believed to be in the wrong house. He went out to try his keys again. He said he touched the face of the mannequin and thought she was dead. He panicked.

Marishka laughed so hard that her body shook. We laughed with her.

Mr. Kertes turned serious, admitting he was under the influence of our powerful wine, and apologized for his previous behavior. Mother accepted his apology.

Father disapproved of our little prank, but became sympathetic toward Mr. Kertes. When Father heard what Mr. Kertes had said about himself, Father signified that Mr. Kertes should no longer be self-conscious around us. Father explained that when he was a child, his father, a schoolteacher, had earned very little. The family had barely enough food to eat. Yet, his father never was ashamed. This was Father's way to tell Mr. Kertes that we knew his background, and still we admired him just the same.

"What is important, is the real person inside you," Father said.

Those words were indeed effective. Mr. Kertes dropped his false accent and began to act like a human being, demonstrating weaknesses and strengths that are a natural part of any complete personality. From Mother's joke and Father's kind understanding we all benefited. Within a few days Mr. Kertes presented us with extra food ration cards for which he had no use. After a week of more gentle gestures we settled down into a very real human path. The only question remained, how long this would last. Mr. Kertes saw no reason why it shouldn't continue indefinitely. In that spring of 1943, we endured the best we could.

Chapter 5

Tibor's letters arrived regularly during the spring. He sent modern psychology study books too, and Mother insisted upon reading them ahead of me, Although some were far from her interest. I assured her that she could relax. Tibor had no intention to poison my mind with literature.

Mother said literature is a strong weapon which writers use to penetrate into the reader's mind. She believed it was as important to be clean in mind as it was to be clean in body.

Displeased as I was with her reasoning, still I would never ask Tibor to stop sending the books. I wrote him how much I appreciated his effort to widen the world he was opening for me. I asked if there was anything I could send him to reciprocate and he requested a recent photograph.

One of Father's favorite hobbies was photography. He not only snapped pictures but developed them himself in a dark room he had set up in our house. He had received many awards and several of his war pictures had appeared in the newspapers. In an annual tradition, when the weeping sour cherry tree, near the center of our yard was in full bloom, he would take several pictures of me, as I reached up and touched the blossom-laden branches.

This year it was a Sunday afternoon when Father decided to perform the ritual. The sun was shining, there was hardly any breeze. The beauty of the flowers and the trees was making us believe that our yard was the only place in the world where peace resided. It was one of the few occasions when Father smiled with the genuine old smile which we loved so much. He set up his camera and I, infected with his smile,

posed for him. When he was finished, he kissed me on the forehead. The front gate opened just as he was carrying the camera back to the house.

A tall, frail man, badly in need of a shave stuck his head into the yard. Waiting a few moments before making another move, he took two steps forward and looked around. Stepping once more, he looked around again. I stood between the rose bushes and thought how strangely he acted, like a squirrel in the forest. Being afraid of human beings, it will spy every which way before moving in any direction.

Father knew practically everybody in the village, so when this man intruded into our dream world, he appeared to be puzzled. He waited at the flower beds until the man approached him.

The stranger seemed unusually nervous, and still fidgeted when he met Father face-to-face. He kept turning his head while the rest of him trembled. I thought, perhaps he was a thief and someone was chasing him. Looking closer, I saw his pale, hollow face, the cheekbones protruding through his bluish skin. I noticed his faded, worn shirt, and slacks ripped at the bottom. The heels of his shoes were as flat as if he had been walking forever on ragged rocks; he wore no socks.

Afraid of him, I drew closer to my father.

"Mein bruder," the man said in German, meaning "my brother."

Father's eyebrows wrinkled, *"Ich?"*, meaning "I."

"Hilfe, bitte," the man asked for help.

Father didn't seem to understand why the man sought his aid. Yet, he couldn't rest until he discovered how to help.

The man put his hand on Father's arm and led him further into the yard. When they reached the shelter of the lilac bushes, the man said he was hungry.

Father believed in feeding a hungry person first, and asking questions later.

He motioned to the stranger to follow him and they went into the kitchen. Father told me to stay on guard, and knock on the door if anyone approached.

This precaution puzzled me. I leaned against the wall, wondering what sort of

person we had in our house. Why would Father keep me out while he talked with the stranger? What things could he possibly say which were wrong for me to hear? After all, it was Father's habit to bring home strangers on Friday nights after the synagogue services. They were welcomed and treated as honored guests. I always was allowed to stay and listen to their stories of travel or personal experiences, old folk tales or anecdotes of religious nature. However, this man was different. He had an aura of doom around him that made me shiver.

After awhile, I paced in the corridor, then leaned over the stairs and peeked out to the yard. Mr. Kertes appeared. He greeted me with a nod of his head and retreated to his quarters. A few minutes later Varga stuck his big nose out the door and wanted to go into the kitchen. (Since it was Sunday afternoon, Marishka was away visiting her family who lived on the outskirts of the village. She was always happy to return to us because she couldn't get along with her stepmother. Marishka endured her only for the sake of her father.) When I told Varga that Marishka was still out, he walked away.

I was relieved when the kitchen door finally opened. Amazingly, the man who came out wasn't the one who had entered. This stranger was clean-shaven, and except for his shoes, was well-dressed. He smiled at me in passing, then rushed down the pathway and out the gate.

The door was ajar and I ran into the kitchen. Mother was clearing away the dishes. "He was very hungry," she said.

I expected her to tell more, but she avoided me. I had to know what was the mystery. I went into the bedroom to approach Father. He sat by the window, working his crossword puzzle. He had his eyes fixed on a magazine when I entered and that made me even more curious. He was pretending to be relaxed.

"Are you going to tell me?" I asked.

"What?"

I was angry, knowing he held something back from me. "About the man, who was he?" I asked and stood akimbo by the side of his chair.

“Egyptian sun god, two letters?” he asked me.

“No, Father. Tell me the truth.”

Father peered over his glasses and said, “He was from Poland, passing through, and he needed some help.” He turned his attention back to the puzzle.

“Did he have any papers?” I asked.

“Why do you want to know?” Father was avoiding my question.

“How could anyone travel around the county without papers?”

“I have no idea.” Father sounded disturbed. “And I would rather not talk about it anymore.”

Less than an hour later, two policemen knocked at our door, asking whether we had seen a runaway Jew. Before waiting for an answer, they began searching around the house. At first, they poked their noses into the summer kitchen and tossed the furniture around, while we stood stone-still in the yard. Next, they went to the built-in hen house, that was already empty because the chickens were out in the poultry yard.

One policeman bent down and crawled inside, then pulled back, cursing. Obviously he had encountered some chicken droppings. In my fear I laughed inwardly.

Then they walked into room eleven. The policemen ransacked the whole place before reaching the cabinet where Father stored his army uniform. They tore the door wide open and separated the garments with their bayonets. When they saw Father’s uniform with all his medals, they paused.

“It’s mine,” Father announced with pride.

“Sorry,” one of them said gruffly. The policemen stepped out to the yard and talked to each other for a few minutes. Father was clenching his fist. He was so nervous he even forgot to light up a cigarette so customary to his every emotion.

Finally, one of them turned to Father and ordered him to report any suspicious character.

Father let out a deep sigh after they left the yard. I felt dizzy. We returned to the house.

"Maybe you should tell me about it," I demanded. My parents looked disturbed, each one waiting for the other one to speak. After a long silence Father elected to explain.

The man had escaped from a huge concentration camp in Poland, called Auschwitz. He had a number tattooed on his arm. He had been running and hiding, and now he was going to Budapest where he had heard that a Jewish agency could provide him with shelter. Although the man had spent almost one hour with my parents, Father condensed his story into a few, brief sentences.

The secret of the Polish man was whispered about our Jewish community in wider detail. His tales of horror and suffering spread like a plague, making the Jews stop, think and shiver. They were shaking their heads. Some believed; others didn't, but they all were deeply disturbed.

For days afterward, I had nightmares. I saw long lines of tattooed arms, but no bodies, and I would wake up screaming.

Trying to relieve my nervous tension, I went to the bookstore for something new to acquire. I saw a book by Franz Werfel about the tragic massacre of the Armenian people by the Turks. Werfel's descriptions of the events people had suffered on account of their race was the wrong thing for me to read. I had to find something light, something cheerful, perhaps like a P.G. Wodehouse book.

One rainy morning, on my way to Father's store, I saw the mailman approach. The wind at this point was famous for turning umbrellas inside out and for stealing people's hats. Old Joska walked cautiously, bucking the wind. He gave me two letters which I put inside the pocket of my raincoat to save them from being drenched.

Once inside, I removed the letters and noticed one addressed to me. I handed Father the other letter and withdrew into his office. Curiously, I examined the envelope and tried to guess where it came from because I didn't recognize the handwriting. As I opened it, a short, thin, stick slipped out and fell on the floor. I picked it up and held it nervously while reading the letter which explained why the stick had been enclosed.

When Tibor was sixteen years old, he had read an English novel in which a judge had used a stick to announce the fate of a man before him. If he found the defendant guilty, the judge would break the stick.

The letter continued, "My son made me promise then, when he grows up and finds himself a woman he loves, I should give her a stick and ask if she loved him too, she should return the stick in one piece. If she doesn't love him, she should give it back, broken. I know that you are Jewish, and I'm asking you, despite all your problems, if you still feel that you could stay with my son until better times, please send back the stick in one piece. If not, I'll understand."

It was signed by Tibor's mother. I trembled as I read on, and unknowingly I broke the stick. When I realized what I had done, I panicked. My first thought was to run to Eta and ask her advice, but knowing how much she was against my relationship with Tibor, I decided against it. I folded the letter and hid it temporarily behind a box of stationery. Then I thought to turn for help to Miss Tereza Farkas, our clerk, for the past twelve years. I watched her from a short distance, eyeing her intently as she sold this and straightened out that. I stared while with great precision she made cigarettes for Father with a little machine. I tried to gauge her mood, her receptivity, trying to fathom all I knew about her, debating whether she was the right person to be my confidante.

I was undecided. Miss Farkas, single, in her mid-thirties, was tall, slim, with wide hips. Her fingers were long, her hands strong. Her thin lips and gracious smile generated a pleasant warmth and genuine charm. Being shy and quiet, she blushed easily.

Tereza was more religious than anyone I knew in the village. She went to confession regularly, even though in my wildest imagination, I wondered what sins she could have possibly committed. I strongly weighed the possibilities of her rejecting my request. Having no alternatives, I approached her, telling her how much I valued her honesty and asked if she would be willing to help me without making any judgment. At first she hesitated as if she wasn't very sure of herself, then said I could

trust her as much as Father had trusted her. I motioned for her to follow me into the office and handed her the letter. Tereza read it slowly and examined the broken stick.

“Do you think we could glue it together?” I asked.

“No. Promise if I tell you what I think you should do, you will abide by it?”

I was afraid to promise. I waited without making any comment.

“It might hurt you what I have to say, but here it comes. It was God’s will that you broke the stick. I think this should be the end of your friendship with Tibor.”

I tore the letter from her hand, blaming myself for not being able to make my own decision, yet knowing I wasn’t going to listen to her.

About a week later a letter arrived from Tibor. It was long, with the usual tales about the job he hated, his friend he admired and the books he couldn’t afford to buy. Replying to my complaints of our mounting affliction, Tibor wrote:

“These are difficult times, my dear Dew Drop, and you must be strong. You must remember, during extreme hardship you can rely only on yourself. Believe me, there is no God.”

I heard Tibor speak these words before, but never no pointedly directed at me. It is one thing to entertain such thoughts as abstract possibilities, but it is quite something else to feel such cold ideas focused on oneself. I felt naked and vulnerable, defenseless and confused. His remark was against the belief in the power of God that kept us Jews going for centuries. We needed God now. I needed God now.

This was the letter my mother found in my suit jacket when she wanted to have it cleaned. She cried when she handed it back to me and explained that if Tibor wanted me to deny God, it was for the best that I should deny Tibor. And we both cried. I begged Mother not to tell Father. She agreed if I promised to discontinue our relationship. I decided, no matter how much Tibor meant to me, I had to terminate our friendship. I mailed the broken stick and said good-bye to my love.

My days passed in bitter misery. I only felt better when my cousin Zsuzsi arrived from Budapest for a week’s vacation. Zsuzsi livened up our home immediately. Ever

since her childhood she lived as if her purpose of life was to cheer up every person around her. When she was little , she could hop on two feet like a sparrow, and she could talk backward. Beside playing the piano, she also learned ballet. Zsuzsi brought a large supply of Hitler jokes and we laughed every day. When she left, she took the laughter with her.

During the first week of June Uncle Ignatz, being a Christian, was called into the Hungarian regular army. Aunt Ella had difficulties running the business in his absence. Mother offered my help which I welcomed. Business at our store was even slower than we expected, and now I had a reason to ride my bicycle. I rode out early each morning and returned before dark.

Aunt Ella was a mystery to me. How she became an observant Christian, attending Sunday masses more frequently than she ever did go to the synagogue when she was still Jewish, was beyond my comprehension. I didn't understand why she ran for confession, and how could she believe that Jesus died for her sins? But she was my aunt and I still loved her. I loved Uncle Ignatz too. He was the most unselfish person I had ever known. He had been studying to be a lawyer, but for the sake of my aunt he quit school to get married. At first, Grandfather tried to lock him out of the family circle, but as he got to know him better, he, too, loved him. Grandfather called his only son and his sons-in-law by their given names, but he called Uncle Ignatz "My dear son." Uncle Ignatz was also well-loved in the village. As the referee of the local soccer team, he never was accused of making any unjust decision. I used to wish if I ever got married, my husband would be like Uncle Ignatz. He always granted Aunt Ella's wishes. The story was told that when Ella was pregnant, one cold, winter's night she craved for grapes, and Uncle Ignatz took the train to Budapest to buy her some. He stayed away from drinking, smoking and gambling. When he wasn't working he played with the children.

It turned out that Uncle's assignment lasted only six weeks and he was back home in the middle of July. Shortly thereafter, without any announcement, Mr. Kertes

brought his younger brother Joseph to work with him.

Joseph was a handsome, shy teenager. He had sandy blond hair and deep brown eyes, and a flawless, suntanned complexion. He was a simple soul, not a show-off like his brother. Of course he was less educated than his brother. Joseph often talked about their primitive home. They had no electricity and hardly any furniture. He once confided in Marishka that he had never seen a toothbrush or toothpaste. He asked if it was all right to step on the carpet.

Little Brother was warned to keep his mouth shut, and to stay out of Mr. Kertes' social life. A cot was set up for him in room eleven. He was satisfied living among the mannequins. When not working, he helped us in the garden when old Mr. Demeter became disabled with some strange malady. (It turned out that he had joined the Hungarian Arrow Cross Party.)

Because of the increasing food shortage, Mother had part of our flower garden dug up and planted with vegetables. Joseph was an expert vegetable-gardener. We always had geese for the fat supply and raised chickens as well. This summer Mother also had purchased baby ducklings. Joseph knew how to care for them too. Mother, in her lighter moments, gave names to the ducklings. We had Adolph duck, Benito duck and ducks named after many of the Nazi leaders. Mother said it would be her pleasure to have them slaughtered.

During the latter part of August Dr. Berren, as he had done often, invited himself for lunch. We were eating on the patio when Marishka ran from the poultry yard calling for Joseph.

"Come quickly," she shouted. "Joachim duck just mounted Adolph duck." Dr. Berren, a bit tipsy from drinking wine with his lunch, laughed so hard that he fell off his chair and injured himself on the patio stones.

In early September, Mr. Kertes and Joseph were invited for dinner where many high-class aristocrats would be attending. Mr. Kertes confessed to us that he and Joseph had never learned to eat properly with a fork and knife, and they hadn't been

accustomed to use napkins either. The brothers came in while we were eating dinner. Mother told Marishka to set up places for them, and she served them stuffed cabbage. She asked me to bring in a few books and instructed the boys to place one book under each of their armpits and to make sure that the books stayed put while they ate.

Marishka stood watching, with a broad smile on her face. She told them I had to learn etiquette soon as I was old enough to get off the high chair.

The dinner turned out to be a success and Mr. Kertes left Mother a box of chocolates, which was almost impossible to buy. Wanting to share the treat with all of us, she opened the box. Tiny, white worms crawled between the paper cups that held the various chocolates.

Marishka ran out of the house holding her hand over her mouth. She returned after awhile, pale and panting. She wanted Mother to give the chocolates back to Mr. Kertes, but Mother explained it was the thought that counted.

In October, my new fur coat, an early Hannukah present, arrived from Feherwar. We were going to place it into storage, but I just had to try it on before it was put away. As I twirled around in front of the long mirror, Mother became uncertain if she should let me wear it at home, only if I went to the city. People would talk if they saw me wearing such expensive fur. In that case, I argued, what was the sense in buying it for me?

I was still standing before the mirror enjoying a last look when Mr. Kertes knocked on the door and entered. He viewed the coat from the tip of the collar to the bottom line, and made me turn around. Raising his skinny nose, he remarked he thought it wasn't up-to-date.

Knowing otherwise, I became irritated and asked him where did he have a chance to learn anything about fashion? He stuttered and muttered something and his face turned red. I wanted to snap back, and turned toward Mother. She winked at me to keep quiet. Mr. Kertes said he was in a hurry, and after he left, Mother gave me a lesson in humility. She said, if Mr. Kertes considered himself to be expert at anything,

why should we destroy his self-confidence? There were only a few things beside his work that he knew well, and if knowing the latest style made him happy, let it be so.

“How about me, Mother? Don’t you remember, we saw the same coat in the latest issue of your fashion magazine? Why should you let him be right at my expense?” I took off the fur coat and threw it on her bed.

“You will learn,” she said. Then she picked up the coat and put it into the storage box.

In November the brothers were invited to a ball in the big hall of “The Brown Stag,” the only hotel and restaurant of the village. This was the same hall where plays were performed. Father used to rent it way back when he was president of the Sports Club. It was also used to hold the annual Purim holiday’s masquerade party. I recalled all the joy we used to have and envied the boys for being invited to the ball.

At first, Joseph informed Mother that he didn’t know how to dance, then later on Mr. Kertes admitted the same. As usual, Mother took pity on them. She brought out her violin that had been shelved since Tibor played “La Paloma.” Mother smiled when she put the violin to her chin, and ran the bow across the strings a few times; then she turned the pages one after the other and tuned her beloved instrument. To start, she played some old Gypsy tunes, just to warm up, she said. Her face glowed as she reminisced about the past when we all would sit around her, listening. Small tears gathered in her eyes. She didn’t say, yet I knew that the thoughts she nurtured were strictly her own. She returned to her younger years when it was not wrong for Jewish people to make merry. Her tears began to flow in earnest. There was no dance lesson that night.

On the following evening she found a box of music sheets and explained to the boys the various steps of the waltz. They danced together, taking turns leading. I thought both of them had two left feet, but they were so anxious to learn that I had to give them credit for trying.

“How about Miss Evie dancing with us?” Joseph asked Mother. Mother said it was

up to me and if I wanted to dance it was all right with her.

My toes tingled and I tapped my feet on the floor. I wanted to dance, but not with Joseph and not with Mr. Kertes. I was thinking of Tibor. I wasn't even sure whether he knew how to dance. Still I wanted to be in his arms.

I shook my head. "No, Mother, I don't feel like dancing." I felt if I stayed one minute longer, I would burst out crying, and withdrew quickly into my room. I could hear the violin and Mother counting, "One, two, three, one, two, three..."

It's not fair, I grumbled bitterly. I would show them, I would show the entire world how to dance.

Mother continued the lesson a little longer, then she came into my room and stroked my hair. She knew I was hurting and said that my time would come when I would be the queen of the ball. Only those dancing days seemed as far away to me as a distant planet.

On the morning after the ball the boys told us how much fun they had. Of course the drinks flowed throughout the night and Joseph, getting acquainted with the local wine, enjoyed drinking more than dancing. Mr. Kertes met Miss Szakacs, whom he liked very much and she was interested in him too. She asked him where he had learned to dance and when he explained, Miss Szakacs said Mr. Kertes should convey a thank-you to Mother from her.

A few days later I was in a better mood. Uncle Harry was released from the Labor Corps. The family rejoiced.

Joseph soon had to return to his family. We knew that we would miss his friendly smile. Mother said she hoped he would come back to visit us sometimes. Joseph promised he would, and after saying good-bye, he left.

Chapter 6

Every year before the Christmas shopping rush started, Father became ill and stayed in bed for several days. His illness was only partly physical. The emotional preparation to do his best to please the customers during this most important business season took a toll on his nerves. For the rest of us, we spent Christmas Day in bed from tiredness.

We expected to be different this year. Since the partition of the store Father anticipated that business would be slow. Not that the customers would stay away, but it irked him when they asked for unattainable merchandise. Toys, however, were among the few items we Jews were still allowed to sell. Because our store supplied ninety percent of all the toys bought in the village, Father concentrated on stocking up with a full supply.

In Hungary, on December 6, St. Mikulas Day, it was a tradition for the saint to give toys to the good children. He was accompanied by Crampus, the devil-like figure who, with his chains rattling, scared the bad children.

For some reason the toy supply at our store that usually carried us through the Christmas holiday, depleted to the level before St. Mikulas Day, making it necessary to go to Budapest and replenish the stock as quickly as possible. To my biggest surprise, Father decided to send me to scrounge up toys at the wholesale houses. I was glad that I could do something for my father. At any place of labor, the law permitted only five percent of the workers to be Jews. Since Miss Farkas was the only employee, my working at the store would represent fifty percent. Even though I worked without pay, Father took this law, like all the other insane laws, seriously. I was allowed to work only a few hours each day.

It must have been a hard decision for him to entrust me with such an important

matter. I was grateful and proud. Years before Mother had taught me how to cook, yet she never entrusted me to prepare a complete meal. This was my big chance to show her also what I was capable of doing.

Recalling the many memorable journeys in the past, I looked forward to Budapest. Mother and I had spent several summers at the nearby resort of St. Gellert Mountain, visiting the Fisherman's Bastion, the ruins of the 13th Century Dominican monastery, and other historical sites. Father took me shopping and going to his favorite restaurant was a treat in itself. With Grandmother I went to the City Park, the zoo, and to the circus. With Zsuzsi we traveled to the open air theater at St. Margaret Island. With Emery, during the winters, we attended plays, operas, concerts and went ice skating. Uncle Sandor took us to the Museum of Fine Arts and to the magnificent Dohany Street Synagogue.

In Budapest, the Jewish people were freer than in our village, where everybody knew everybody else. They could walk on the streets without being recognized, and weren't subjected to personal attacks. This freedom allowed them to attend the many activities I enjoyed so much which were forbidden at home. Then I thought of Tibor. Perhaps someplace on the avenue, leading up to Vorosmarty Square, where the bookstores were located, I would see him pass by. He wouldn't expect to see me. I would call his name and he would turn around.

"It is you, Dew Drop," he would cry and run toward me. What would I say? My heart stopped beating just to imagine it. Mother argued against me going to Budapest. When life at home was unsafe, how much more danger would there be for me in the turbulent city? It put a damper on my happy anticipation, knowing Mother would be worried every minute I was gone. She called her older sister, Irma, and asked her to be sure to take good care of me. Aunt Irma replied, Mother should sleep undisturbed since she had raised two daughters without too many mishaps.

Before the war, Father would carry a small amount of cash on his shopping trips. Bills were sent with the merchandise. Since Father was aware that conditions had

changed, he gave me a large sum, and a lecture about money matters. He suggested as long as I would be going to the wholesale district, I also should try to buy other merchandise. As he drew up the list of stores, their locations, the salespersons to ask for, and the goods to buy, he seemed relaxed. Father also handed me a recent picture of himself, resplendent in his military uniform with all his medals.

On the evening before my departure, the entire family gathered at our house to say good-bye and give me advice concerning the trip. By the time they left, I felt somewhat insulted, thinking, they would have given less advice if cousin Lacko or my cousins Erika or Julie were traveling to the moon.

“It is all love,” I tried to convince myself.

Mother continued her lecture even when I was half-asleep. She was concerned that I would be harmed on the train, but her worries were unfounded. Minutes after I boarded the train, enjoying the passing scenery, Father Severin, who used to teach Catechism at our middle school, came into my second-class compartment. I was not his student, yet I knew him well. Once in first grade, while on a field trip up to the ancient ruins of Csoka Castle, I hurt my ankle and Father Severin had carried me down in his arms. We had a pleasant time all the way to Budapest and when I stepped onto the platform, my cousin Zsuzsi shouted, waved and ran toward me.

Zsuzsi could hardly wait for Father Severin to leave. After hugging and kissing me she said she had a great surprise for me. She teased me awhile before telling that a few weeks prior she had been at the Central Post Office and whom did she meet, but my former boyfriend, Tibor.

I was so stunned that I could hardly breathe.

“Wouldn’t you like to see him?” Zsuzsi asked.

Suddenly, all the noise of the station clamored in my ears.

“Hey, are you here with me?” Zsuzsi snapped her fingers in front of my face.

“Ah, did you say, you saw Tibor?”

“You heard me.”

“Did he say he wanted to see me?”

“Not exactly, he only said he wondered how you felt about him.”

“Oh,” I said and sighed, trying desperately not to cry in front of my cousin.

“Does ‘Oh’ mean you care about him, or are you hooked on that stupid Mr. Kertes?”

“You should know me better,” I cried and slapped my cousin's back.

“In that case I’ll tell you what else Tibor said. He asked if by any chance you would be coming to Budapest soon, or he would have to sell his books to pay for the trip to your village. I told him your father would chase him back on the next train. He asked for my address and telephone number, and gave me two numbers to call him if you were in the city. He would come flying. So, do you want him to come flying?”

“Uh-huh,” I said whimpering with full force. “But what about your family? We would have to meet secretly or you, too, would get into trouble.”

“Not in my family. Mother is my friend. I don’t keep secrets from her. So cheer up if you want to see him, I know the way.”

“Call him.”

“Me? I’m so nervous that I couldn’t talk.”

“All right. I’ll call him.”

“What will you say?”

“Would you like to see a movie?”

“With him, sure.”

“I’ll say, ‘Come to the main entrance at the Western Railroad Station tomorrow. We will wait beneath the big clock until six.’ How does that sound to you?”

“Fine,” I said, yet I was still not sure. The quick change of events overwhelmed me. Although she was two years younger than I, Zsuzsi could handle the situation in a more mature way, but I didn’t tell her that. I only said that her mind worked much faster because she wasn’t involved with Tibor.

She replied that I was only half-right. In the city events moved much quicker than

at our sleepy, little village. People lived a faster life in Budapest, and since the war, the speed intensified. Nobody knew how long this lull would last before the storm. Then it would be too late to regret the fun we had missed. I told her that I admired her philosophy.

She kissed me and we ran to get a taxi.

As always, when entering Aunt Irma's third floor apartment, I felt as if I were in a different world. They were jovial people. They didn't take life so dead seriously as we did. They accepted the unchangeable and enjoyed what was still available.

Zsuzsi and her sister, Ilka, were treated as if they were the peers of their parents and the girls were better prepared for life than I was. Aunt Irma, with her permanent smile, reminded me of those gentle, saintly women depicted in the frescoes of the church, always with open arms, always ready to embrace.

While hugging and kissing and talking about the family, Zsuzsi admired, then tried on my new fur coat. Soon after, Uncle Gabor, a husky, dimple-faced giant, told us the latest (dirty) Hitler jokes. He enjoyed seeing me embarrassed. The talk continued until dinner where I was surprised at the abundant food. At home we ate sparingly. Uncle Gabor explained that the country folks have no food because they sell it on the city's black market. He said that I was pale and too skinny. He was right.

Later on Zsuzsi called one of the telephone numbers Tibor had given to her. Frieda Celle, the wife of Tibor's friend, Dr. Celle, promised to relay the message. I was so nervous that I twisted and nearly broke the extension cord. I had to calm down before calling my parents to assure them that I had arrived safely. They took turns talking and showering me with more advice. I felt awfully guilty knowing that on the following day I would be doing something they disapproved, then the next moment I cast it quickly out of my mind. If I was old enough to handle a large amount of their money, surely I was old enough to handle my own affairs.

Aunty and Mother talked for a few minutes and Aunty said in a louder tone, "You should have worried about that the first time you allowed her to put on skates," and she

hung up, grinning.

Before retiring we all kissed each other. Aunt Irma explained that there were going to be three alarm clocks ringing in the morning. Arising at the first alarm would be Uncle Gabor. Uncle, a disabled veteran who lost his left arm in the World War I, was permitted to keep his produce business, and the two maids, Panna and Juci helped him at his store. Aunty would get up at the second alarm and Zsuzsi at the third. I could have my choice and sleep even later, but then I would have to make my own breakfast.

After the lights were turned off, Zsuzsi climbed into my bed and we chatted until midnight until Aunty chased Zsuzsi back into her own bed.

I had trouble falling asleep, partly because the room was warm. At home I always slept with at least one window open, the result of Father's military regimen. Now, perspiring, I saw Tibor's face in the dark. Could it be that tomorrow I actually would see him? After our breakup I dreamed of him often, while also making a conscious effort to forget him. It was wrong to love him. It was against my parents' wishes, and perhaps against those of God. I wanted to pray and ask God to forgive him, to forgive me, to help us find some guiding beam through the fog of hopelessness.

The ringing of the alarm clock startled me, and I jumped up in bed. At home we didn't use any alarm to wake up at a certain time, it came naturally. Within moments it seemed Uncle got up, kissed Zsuzsi and me and left the house.

After the second bell, Aunty kissed us and left with the maids. Zsuzsi slept thorough the bells and the kisses and awakened only for the third alarm, and refused to get up.

She said she wanted to stay home today and her mother should let her sleep. Realizing that this was impossible, she slid out of her bed and readied herself for her work at the photo studio. I joined her as she dressed in the bathroom. We continued talking about the day's activities through breakfast. Naturally, Zsuzsi would come with me to meet Tibor. We could go to a movie near the train station. While putting on her

makeup, Zsuzsi insisted that I should do the same. I enjoyed putting on the makeup; it gave me the complexion of a city girl.

We never stopped talking, even in the elevator. Well, at least she talked since I felt uncomfortable riding down in the elevator cage.

At first we walked to my aunt and uncle's store where I received another bath of instructions regarding transfers from one streetcar to another. After more kissing and hugging, I was on my own. I enjoyed walking on the city streets. I felt free. I loved to look at the tall buildings, the streetcars and the automobiles. I even liked the smell of gasoline. From their makeshift stoves, vendors peddled freshly-roasted chestnuts. It was a pleasure to gaze at the well-dressed women and the decorated windows. Despite the war, Budapest was still a vibrant, boisterous queen. As the song said of Budapest: "The pearl of the Danube and the tears of angels."

I wished I could spend hours sightseeing, but I knew business had to come first.

On the streetcar I counted the stops in a singsong voice until my destination: "Will Tibor come, won't he come?" When I reached the business district, where I had to get off, I wound up with, "He won't come." This upset me.

I had been at the wholesale district with my father many times previously. Now I was stunned. Before me were signs I had never seen before: "Aryans only." "Sorry, no Jewish customers will be served." What was happening? Had Father known, he never would have sent me there.

Hurriedly, I made my way on a crowded street toward the stores I was certain were owned by Jews. Because most of them knew me since childhood, I hoped someone would help me clear my confused state of mind.

When I reached the toy store, the biggest in the country, I was shocked even more. They were also selling German-made toys. I saw German and Italian lead soldiers, army trucks and automobiles, even figures of Hitler and Mussolini, not to mention airplanes that made somersaults and planes strung from the ceiling that dropped noisy bombs or realistic soldiers that parachuted down. I asked Mr. Virag, the

owner of the store, how he, as a Jew, could tolerate selling these toys? He said at least he had a way to get even and make money off the Nazis. He smiled, and I got goose bumps on my back while imagining what my father would say, when opening the boxes he'd find little airplanes bearing swastikas.

I managed to buy many other toys though. When I asked for the bill Mr. Virag informed me he trusted my father well enough to enclose the bill with the merchandise.

After we completed our business transaction, I asked him about the anti-Jewish signs. He said that I shouldn't worry, they were all going to disappear by next Christmas.

Before leaving he reminded me when I was little, he would give me a special toy. Mr. Virag asked if I could think of any. I shook my head and bade him good-bye.

The next stop was a tie manufacturing plant, which formerly belonged to a Jew, now ostensibly owned by a non-Jew. It was still run by Mr. Weinstein whom I knew so well. However, a stranger greeted me and said he was the boss. He looked me over as if he disapproved of my appearance, wrinkling his nose and wiggling it like a rabbit, then sniffing a couple of times. The man declared that he would sell for cash only. I told him I understood. He brought out some samples and with a straight face, tried to convince me they were the latest style. I asked if *he* would like to wear them. Sucking in a mouthful of air through his crooked, yellow teeth, he took back the samples and brought out another bunch of ties made of a synthetic fabric, saying they were genuine silk. I laughed. His face reddened and he admitted the truth. Next, he told me I had to buy 80% of the synthetic ties if I wanted to get 20% of the silk ones. We haggled. I was determined to prove that I wasn't a stupid country girl. We settled on 60-40% and he gave me the bill. I reminded him since I paid cash I was entitled to the cash discount.

He mumbled something under his thin mustache and figured the discounting. I was about to leave when Mr. Weinstein walked in. He remembered my father and asked about his welfare, then he examined my purchase. He sent his "boss" to the stockroom to see the new merchandise he had brought in. While the "boss" was gone,

Mr. Weinstein congratulated me on making a good deal. He said other customers never got as high as 40% silk. He winked at me and reached into a cabinet, near the service counter, and pulled out a bolt of dark blue, white polka-dot soft cloth and wrapped it with a piece of newspaper. He handed it to me, sent his best regards to my father, and told me to leave quickly. Stunned, I obeyed.

The next stop was a leather goods store. Since Jews were forbidden to sell anything made of leather, the store was half-empty; it had only a few imitation leather suitcases and purses. The owner, Mr. Grun, was one of my father's army buddies and they had kept up the friendship ever since. I showed him my father's latest photograph and he exclaimed, "He still is as debonair as ever." Mr. Grun told me some old army stories I had heard often from my father. Then I asked him about the anti-Jewish signs.

He knew many disturbing stories about the misfortunes of the Jewish merchants, yet he was confident that the war would be over and things were going to be as good as they had been before.

I visited several stores that morning but bought only a small amount of goods. Returning to the business district, I went to the store where we had been purchasing lace and ribbons. I recalled the lovely ribbons the owner gave me whenever we met.

From there, I stopped at two more stores and long lines for a small amount of merchandise. The shelves were bare before I reached the service counter. I was very discouraged, and decided to head back to my aunt's home. The streets were crowded and I bumped into people as I walked along. On the streetcar, people pushed me around, saying, "pardon me" as they stepped on my toes.

Five minutes after five I met Zsuzsi at the family's store. I had to meet Tibor at six o'clock and time was fleeting. Aunty already had left for home to make dinner. We rushed to the apartment and rang for the janitor to take us up to the third floor. He was slow in coming and stalled even more to tell us silly jokes. Inside the elevator he stopped between floors to tell more jokes. I wanted to jump out and walk up the stairs. After what seemed to me like an hour, we finally reached the third floor. Zsuzsi rang the

bell. I glanced at my watch. Another three minutes passed until Aunty answered. She had been washing her hair, and said dinner wasn't ready.

Five-thirty. Instead of going to the kitchen Aunty inquired about our day's activities. Zsuzsi said she would tell her later as we were in a hurry to catch the six o'clock show. With Aunt Irma insisting we eat a sandwich, we had no time to change our clothes. Instead, we grabbed our coats and put on our hats as we ran down the corridor. We applied lipstick while waiting for the streetcar. It was two minutes before six when we reached the Western Station.

"Let's not stand by the clock," I suggested. "Tibor will think I don't care enough about him to be punctual."

"But you do care," she teased.

I had a nervous coughing spell, then shook my head and walked away. Zsuzsi followed.

"Mm ... you aren't interested?" She opened her purse, took out a mirror and placed it in front of my face.

I peeked into the mirror. Seeing my miserable expression, I laughed. For a while we were busy watching the crowd. I glanced at my wrist watch several times. Turning back toward the entrance of the station, I repeatedly checked the big clock.

It was already past six o'clock, but still there was no sign of Tibor. We would let him have five more minutes. After all, traffic was very heavy. Then we allowed him more time. By twenty minutes after six, I lost my patience. If he was uninterested, why should we wait?

Zsuzsi suggested waiting another five minutes. Still Tibor didn't appear. I felt terribly hurt but didn't want Zsuzsi to see how much. Taking one look back at the clock, we ran for the streetcar. I kept turning back, wishing I had never known him.

Zsuzsi tried to console me. She said since we had no idea why Tibor failed to show up, we shouldn't blame him. Maybe he had an accident, a remark which made me feel worse. How cruel to think he may be lying injured someplace and I'm blaming

him for being late.

The show had already started. We had missed the newsreel. People were laughing all around us at the movie. After a few minutes, Zsuzsi burst out laughing too. In the dark among those hundreds of people, I felt so alone that I cried.

A lady beside me asked if I was ill. I told her I was all right. She must have thought I was crazy because the show was so hilarious.

Wiping my tears, I looked up at the movie screen. The story was about a bride, dressed in a white wedding gown, waiting to get married, while the groom was off playing in a hot poker game and having completely forgotten about the wedding. The mother of the bride, a tall, fat woman, ran around the town looking for him, losing the flowers off her floppy hat. When she finally reached the house where they were playing poker, she couldn't get through the doorway.

I had to laugh too. What if Tibor was playing a hot poker game someplace and had forgotten about our date? When I saw the hardship the bride on the screen had to go through, my own problem seemed to shrink. Hearing me laugh, Zsuzsi said she was happy that I'd forgotten about Tibor. That opened the dam of self-pity and I was crying even when the screen couple finally was united.

After the show we returned to the apartment. Dinner was waiting for us, only I could barely eat. Aunty was concerned. I told her usually I would get a headache after a show. However, Aunty had special eyes to see that something was wrong with her children. Just like my mother would, she tried to question me. She asked if I had run into trouble at the wholesale district? Did I lose some money? Then she worried that I was sick, and wanted to take my temperature.

Zsuzsi grabbed me by my arm and dragged me out to the hallway. She warned that we must tell her mother the truth before calling my parents, else my mother would arrive on the next train, or I would have to leave in the morning. The telephone rang just as we entered the parlor. My parents were calling. Mother warned me not to wear silk stockings if the weather was too cold, and eat everything Aunt Irma would serve.

Next, Father was on the line. I told him all that I accomplished. When I told him about the German toys, he laughed. I wished I could have seen his face. He asked how I was doing with the cash and said if there was any left over, I should find some other merchandise our villagers would like to purchase for Christmas. I asked what he had in mind, but he said he'd let me be the judge.

Aunty listened to our conversation on the other line. She winked at me, and promised my parents she wouldn't let it snow for the rest of the week.

Uncle kissed me and got ready for bed. Aunty left to instruct the maids, giving Zsuzsi the chance to warn me again that we'd better tell her mother about Tibor. I cried. What would happen tomorrow if she would tell my parents about him?

"Stop whining already," Zsuzsi said, sounding like someone much older than her age. "I told you, my mother will keep our secret."

On cue, Aunty entered and asked what was our secret? Zsuzsi spared no details. Aunty wiped her forehead and smiled.

"Whew, I thought you were coming down with influenza." Changing the subject she reminded Zsuzsi that it was time to practice on her piano. She had been playing piano since the age of five, and no matter what, she had to practice every day. Even when she visited us, Grandma, who owned a piano, saw that Zsuzsi practiced.

Still feeling miserable, I hesitated at first to join her in a routine we used to do as children, but then I said, "Why not?"

Zsuzsi slipped into Aunty's long, velvet robe, decorated her hair with silk flowers, applied makeup and sat down ceremoniously at the piano, acting as if she were at a concert hall. I dressed in my long, blue satin bathrobe, used the makeup and threw the lace piano covering over my shoulder. She just began to play when the doorbell rang.

I tossed the piano cover over a chair, stepped out to the hallway, pulled the window curtain on the door slightly aside and peeked out. I nearly fainted when I saw Tibor. Dizzy for a few seconds, finally I opened the door and I embraced him. In his arms, the world disappeared around me.

His lips were pressed to mine. I couldn't breathe. It was like a dream, soon to be ending. My body trembled as I held onto him, fearing I would sink to the floor if I let go. When he finally released his lips, he held my face with both hands, gazed into my eyes and whispered, "My little Dew Drop." And I thought how could I have lived without him.

I heard Zsuzsi clearing her throat. Tibor must have seen her and lowered his hands to his side. Zsuzsi wanted to know what was keeping me so long? To me, it seemed only a few seconds. Tibor appeared uncertain what to do next. He kept his hat on although it was customary that a gentleman remove it when he enters a home.

Zsuzsi smiled and put Tibor at ease, telling him to remove his snow-covered hat and overcoat.

"Is anything wrong?" Aunty appeared at the door.

I felt uneasy from the way she surveyed my wet robe, and I wondered what was going on in her mind. She smiled at Tibor and asked him to come in.

"*Kezet csokolom,*" Tibor said the customary greeting of "I kiss your hand." Zsuzsi introduced her mother to Tibor. Aunty apologized for our night clothes and asked Tibor to give us a little time to get dressed. As Zsuzsi and I left the room, I was worried what Aunty would say to him.

When I returned, Aunty smiled and asked what took me so long? I knew then that I had no reason to fear. She didn't give me a chance to say a word to Tibor. I could only gaze at his very pale, tired face. He was talking with Aunty, while keeping his eye on me. When our eyes met, my heart did an extra beat.

"Where were you at six o'clock tonight?" Aunty asked, thus giving Tibor a hint that she was well-informed. He smiled. I imagined he was relieved to know that he caused no trouble because his features relaxed as he told his side of the missed date.

Saturday, while working at the post office, Tibor's mother called from Majsza. She had received a notice from the draft board, urging Tibor to return home immediately. The notice threatened unless Tibor was back at the factory on Monday morning, he would have to leave for military duty.

Aunty asked why he had left the factory in the first place since he knew of the consequences.

Tibor explained he hated his job. He figured with each hour of work, he helped to lengthen the war. He loathed the Nazis as much as we did. He left the factory under pretext of poor health. He worked at the post office for a few months, going for periodic health checkups. Dr. Celle, his best friend, would examine him and turn him down for service. Thus, he was kept out of the army and from helping the war effort at the same time. Tibor detested military life, and opposed killing people for some idiotic political reason. He also held an unfavorable opinion of the Hungarian government.

Aunty asked if he was a Communist. In answer, Tibor said the Communists ruled with the same senseless cruelty as the Nazis. His stepfather had lived in America for three years and after he returned he told his family how free the people were on the other side of the ocean. Tibor would never fight against such ideals and if he lived long enough, he would emigrate to America.

Aunty told Tibor that Grandmother's brother, Jake, lived in America. He had invented an airplane part that brought him a letter of appreciation from President Roosevelt.

Tibor was impressed and continued with his story of the lost date. He reported for work at the factory in the morning, and instructed his landlady to call the post office and tell them he was sick. He worked all day at the factory and had dinner at Dr. Celle's house. It was around 8:30 when Mrs. Celle, amidst a mountain of apologies, remembered to tell him about the message she had received on Sunday. Tibor was very upset. He knew, if he wanted to see me, he had to get in touch with Zsuzsi. He couldn't decide whether to call, or come straight over. He was afraid if he waited another day, maybe I'd be gone. He worried all the way until he reached our King Street address. He knew it improper to burst in at nine-thirty at night without being invited. He was sorry for not weighing the trouble I might get into because of him.

He took out his handkerchief and wiped his forehead, then described the agony

how he paced up and down in front of the building like a maniac before deciding to come up. We all laughed.

“No wonder you looked like a snowman,” Zsuzsi said, and told him to relax. His troubles were over. She had a mischievous twinkle in her eyes and I hoped she would refrain from telling the way I acted when he hadn’t shown up.

Aunt Irma excused herself to make hot tea for Tibor to warm him up. Zsuzsi added that Tibor was only cold from the weather, and she followed her mother into the kitchen.

Tibor waited for a moment, then rose from the chair and sat by my side on the sofa. It seemed so natural to be near him. Why was it so wrong to be with him when it felt so good?

He kissed my hand and asked about my family’s well-being. I told him some of the problems we had. His dark eyes became even darker.

Then I asked about himself. Tibor admitted, this past year was the worst in his life.

“Why did you break the stick my mother had sent you?” His voice trembled.

“It was an accident,” I said and described how it happened.

“You should have written me the truth. I would have understood.” He wrung his hands. His face became distorted. At that point I was afraid of him and drew away to the farthest end of the sofa. I sat thinking that my punishment had begun, and tried to put the blame on someone else.

“You see, Miss Farkas said it had to be God’s will that the stick broke. It was a sign that we weren’t meant for each other.”

“I told you before there is no God.” I used to describe his voice as brown velvet. Now he sounded more like rough sandpaper.

He sat, torturing me with his angry look. He said he honestly tried to forget me, and succeeded insofar as dating other girls. He knew he had no right to ask me, but Zsuzsi had mentioned about a Mr. Kertes, and he wanted to know how I felt about him.

“I ignore Mr. Kertes! He is an inflated balloon,” I said and was about to cry.

He let out a long, powerful sigh and leaned back on the sofa. "He must be a fool if he hasn't made any advances toward you. I would have gone mad knowing that only a door was between us."

"Hey, the door isn't the only thing that keeps us apart," I said, raising my voice.

Tibor gave me one of those harsh glances which made me feel as if he had hit me. He left me and moved back to this chair.

Aunty and Zsuzsi brought in the tea and cakes. Tibor took only tea. Aunty kept up the conversation about politics. He looked frequently at the clock, and when Zsuzsi yawned, he apologized for keeping us up, knowing we had to work in the morning.

He rose, kissed Aunty's hand and thanked her for the way he had been received. She told him he was welcome to return the next evening. Tibor asked her permission to take me and Zsuzsi to the theater or any place of entertainment. She agreed. He promised to be back at 7:30 the next evening.

Although Zsuzsi acted as if she would fetch Tibor's coat, I, alone, was allowed to escort him to the door.

I just stood there, facing the door, and touched my throbbing lips. I turned around, leaned against the door, and cried. Yes, it would be wonderful to die. I spent a few minutes in the kitchen to calm down.

Back in the living room I thanked Aunty for being so understanding. She said she would tell Uncle about Tibor in the morning. I kissed her and danced all the way to the bathroom.

When I returned she asked about my plans for the following day. She mentioned the theater. I said we'd better wait for Tibor's suggestion. I knew he was always short of money,.

After Aunty kissed me good night, I told Zsuzsi almost everything, including his dating other girls to try to forget me. She remarked it was rude for him to tell me and asked why I didn't tell him that I, too, had other dates?

"How could I? Tibor always stressed the importance of telling the truth, even if it

hurt.”

She asked if I would marry him if the law would allow it.

I had to punch the pillow twice before answering. He knew me better than anyone I had ever met. She replied that was because he had been studying psychology.

I hated Zsuzsi for thinking like an adult. However, I had to agree.

“Maybe it wasn’t meant to be that you should marry him.” She kissed me good night and hopped into bed.

I tossed in bed for hours, not wanting to end the night that brought Tibor back to me. I could still hear his voice, see the deep, darkness of his eyes. I could smell his aftershave lotion and taste his cigarette on my lips.

Chapter 7

In the morning I slept through the first two rings of the alarm clock. When I opened my eyes after the third ring, I noticed a little note on the nightstand.

“You must have had happy dreams because, I saw you smile,” Aunty had written.

Before setting out for my business adventures I stopped at the family’s store. Uncle scrutinized me very seriously. I worried that he disapproved of our last night’s visitor. When he smiled, I relaxed. Aunty told me that Ilka had called and invited me to have lunch with her.

Ilka had been married for four years. She worked with her husband at their store and lived with her in-laws. I always loved Ilka, but was never so close to her as to Zsuzsi. Ilka was five years older than I.

I told Aunty I would be glad to see Ilka. She lived on Kazinczy Street, near one of the stores I would be going to that day.

Aunty checked the newspaper for the season opening of the Magyar Theater. I thought it was rather strange as the theater season usually began much earlier. She explained that this theater needed time to comply with the air raid regulations. She said the tickets were their treat, but I should buy only four tickets as Uncle had no taste for Ibsen dramas. She gave me the money and I put it into my change purse. I hoped Tibor wouldn’t object to Aunty paying for the tickets.

I left the store in high spirits. I felt like singing and dancing on the street. Even the crowd seemed friendlier that day. The snow started to fall. Someone once told me that city snow was dirty, but to me, it looked so clean. I tilted my head backwards, and with my mouth open, I tried to catch the drifting flakes. The pedestrians gazed at me and smiled.

I had to calm myself and get down to serious business.

My first stop was at the purse store. It was empty. There wasn't even one customer. I asked the salesman, whose name was on my list, if there was something wrong? Did I come too late? Had they sold everything already?

The salesman laughed. The situation was just the opposite. The store had received a double shipment of purses in the morning, and when the customers saw there was an ample supply, they didn't think it was necessary to rush and buy. I thought that was amusing and laughed too.

I selected purses in the middle price range. When I was finished, I asked to take one purse with me since I wanted to give it to my aunt to wear at the theater for opening night.

He wrapped a black imitation leather purse and handed it to me. I offered to pay for the bill. He said it was unnecessary, but to make things easier I could pay for the one I was about to carry with me.

I opened my purse and looked for my wallet, but could only find my change purse. At first I panicked. Perhaps I had lost it. Then I realized I was so much in the clouds that morning that I must have forgotten to put it into my purse. Telling my dilemma to the salesman, I asked if he wouldn't mind too much to add the cost to the bill. He agreed.

Next, I walked across the street and into a dark, obscure shop where I was supposed to buy hairpins for the peasant women. In our village the Schwabish women wore their hair in the same manner as they had over the past 200 years. Because the hairpins were made of imported deer antlers, I knew it would be difficult to obtain them. Per my father's instructions, I asked for Mr. Benes, the owner of the store.

Instead, a frail, young woman approached me, and with tears in her eyes introduced herself as Adel Benes. Her father was in a Russian prison camp. His Gentile commanding officer spread tales of torture and deprivation in the frigid climate. I thought even if the stories were true, why was the officer so cruel to make the family suffer much more?

“You shouldn’t believe what the officer says. He must be using lies for propaganda purposes. Trust in God to bring back your father safely.” I tried to be helpful.

Miss Benes stopped crying long enough to concentrate on business, which she evidently knew very little about. She pulled out the sample chart, which I looked over and I gave her the order. When she added up the bill, I noticed she made a mathematical error. I could have made an extra hundred *pengo* profit, but it would have been dishonest to take advantage of her ignorance. I called her attention to her mistake. She thanked me and cried. I assured her, I wouldn’t mention it to her father, the next time I came around to shop. At first she smiled, then said there wouldn’t be a next time as her mother was selling the store.

I asked if she could send the bill with the goods as I had left my money at home. In her kindness, she offered me a loan which I declined.

Since I had only a small amount of cash left, I couldn’t shop any longer, and so decided to go and buy the theater tickets.

I browsed around in the lobby, promising myself when the war would be over, I would come often to the theater.

Leaving the theater, I indulged in a few minutes of window-shopping before lunch. This district of the city was famous for its elegant retail stores. Before the war, they displayed original French designer clothes. Even now the windows were laden with the latest style of outfits and sparkling evening gowns. I envied the women who had reason to wear them now.

I gaped the longest at the china shops, wishing all those delicate figurines and crystal vases were mine.

From there I rushed to Ilka’s apartment where I found her alone. We had lunch together. Ilka had red hair, and was a well-built sportswoman who had won several medals for long-distance swimming. She also played the piano. Each of her six brothers-in-law played a different musical instrument, and it was said that Dani Gati

married Ilka only because they needed a piano player.

My next business call was at the manufacturer of fur *kuchmas* (fur hats the men of our village wore in winter). Wanting to avoid the middleman, Father advised me to go directly to the factory. From his note, I knew the kuchmas would be sent without having me having to pay for them in advance.

I rode to the given address and noticed a sign on the door, "Moved." The new address was scribbled as if it had been written by a nearsighted rooster. I asked around for directions for the long ride ahead to the outskirts of the city. I rode two streetcars, followed by a long walk, passed a huge military barracks where armed guards stood at the gate. I saw many factories, their tall chimneys puffing foul-smelling, thick, black smoke. The houses were crying for fresh paint. Even the snow on the ground was dirty. The chestnut vendor on the corner wore gloves without fingers. An elderly man chased a boy. I couldn't quite make out what he was shouting. I suspected the boy had taken something that belonged to the man. In the middle of the street, dodging the traffic two badly-dressed men, one of them wielding a broken umbrella, were fighting with each other. The store windows had wrought iron bars for protection. The entire neighborhood gave me an eerie feeling as if it were populated with shady characters. Had my parents known what kind of place this was, they surely wouldn't have allowed me to come here. I turned around frequently, darting my head behind me as I rushed through several narrow, dingy alleys. I was relieved when the hat factory came into sight.

After entering I had to walk through a poorly lighted hallway and a dark stockroom until I reached the office, which also served as the showroom. Father warned me that the owner, Mr. Kovacs, a stingy bachelor, was too cheap to spend the necessary money to clean up the place. He was right. The office contained a marred, old desk and two broken-down wicker chairs, and lots of torn cardboard boxes. The place smelled like burned suet.

I was supposed to look for a balding man, with a chewed-up pencil behind his

ear, wearing the worst-fitting suit in the world. It was unnecessary to ask for Mr. Kovacs. Sitting behind the desk, the man fit Father's description perfectly.

I laughed when he measured me through his dirty eye-glasses. I introduced myself. "Hm, hm." he mumbled and asked if it was difficult for me to find his new place. I was going to tell him the place didn't look new, but he must have meant the new address. I shook my head.

Then he asked why my Father sent me, when he knew that Mr. Kovacs had no stomach for women.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Kovacs, my brother is dead," I informed him, hoping to soften his heart.

His reply was another set of "Hm, hms," rather than some expression of sympathy. Perhaps he was also stingy with words.

Father also warned me that old Mr. Kovacs drove a hard bargain, and had a habit of cheating. I stepped up close to the desk, gazed into his bloodshot eyes and was determined to teach him a lesson.

Disturbed by my glare, Mr. Kovacs turned aside and shuffled a stack of wrinkled, yellowish papers on his desk.

I wanted to sit down, I told him, if he had no objections. He waved his hand as if chasing away a fly, mumbling that I should go on with the order, he had no time to waste. I sat down on the wobbly chair and said I had no intention to do any business with him. I was passing by and only dropped in to say "hello" from my father as we have started to do business with a different furrier, whose prices were much lower than his. The other furrier had courteous salesmen and fancy showrooms too.

Mr. Kovacs growled like a bear caught in a trap; his whole body shook and he demanded to know the name of the new supplier. I told him I would look it up, and opened my purse, pretending to do just that.

"No, no, don't bother, tell me what you want and I'll beat their prices/" Mr. Kovacs wiped his forehead with a big, dingy handkerchief. In an about-face, he acted like a

lamb. He offered to pay the freight charges, something he had never done before. I picked up his best fur hats and offered him low prices. He grimaced as if he had a toothache, but agreed. After the bill was written up I told him I had no money on my person. He said my father's name was gold in his books.

On the way out I confessed we never have done business with any other furrier. I only made it up to make him sorry for not valuing my business capabilities just because I was a woman.

Mr. Kovacs wiped his forehead again and shouted, "Tell me, how old are you? Maybe it is still not too late for me to get married?"

"You are not my type." I laughed and left.

Still smiling, I walked down the street. As I neared the alley, my smile vanished. A dozen policemen were pushing a crowd of people back into the alley. A woman loudly complained that this was another one of those lousy raids.

As I was being jostled with the crowd, I remembered hearing about police raids, but never thought I would be caught in one of them. I turned to a fairly well dressed woman and asked what was going on.

She explained that being in the district of the ammunition depot, the government feared of spies and saboteurs. Another woman joined in, saying, they were searching for foreign Jews, who with the help of the local Jews, were hiding in the city. She was sure if they caught any they would be shipped back to their countries, or into concentration camps where they would be killed.

Cold sweat ran down the back of my neck. I remembered the Polish man who had come to our house during the summer. I was petrified, ready to cry.

The policemen set up barricades at both ends of the alley, trapping us all. One of the policemen was asking for identification papers. I never owned any identification papers. In our village, everybody knew who I was. Now, I feared I was in trouble.

I asked a young woman near me, holding an infant in her arms, what would happen to those without identification papers. She said they would be kept at the

police station until someone would come and identify them.

For me that didn't mean the end of the world. Aunty Irma would fetch me and take me home. Then I heard screaming and shouting near the wall, and as I tried to move away, I saw a boy about 13 or 14 years old. He wore a thin overcoat and summer shoes. A tiny, blond curl of hair, a style worn only by pious Jews, peeked out on one side from beneath his cap. I was pushed against him and heard him murmuring "*Shema Yisroel*," the Hebrew prayer only another Jew would understand.

Leaning closer to the boy, I asked if he could speak Hungarian. He tried to move away from me. I whispered to him in German that he need not be scared, I was Jewish too.

"Not German," he whispered back, "Pole."

"Oh, dear God, I have to get you out of here."

The boy continued to pray.

Across from the alley, soldiers were coming through the guarded gate and were boarding a military bus. I spotted a gray-haired officer who resembled my father. I turned to the boy and explained to him in German that he should do what I say, no matter what happened. I reached up to his cap and was about to tuck in his ear lock, when the boy blushed and pulled away from me. His eyes became cloudy. His hand shook. He nodded in submission, then quickly hid the curl beneath the cap. I grabbed for his hand and ran. Sliding on the slippery snow, I noticed that the ground was covered with large sums of paper money, mostly foreign currency. Golden coins rolled in the slush. I trampled over all that wealth, and ran right up to a policeman at the blockade.

"Where do you think you're going?" yelled a policeman.

"Please, let us go. Our father is about to board the bus and we must say good-by to him."

The policeman turned around and spotted the officer.

He moved away from the roadblock and saluted the officer.

“Father, Father, wait for us,” I shouted. “Go, *Ocsi* (Ocsi, meaning younger brother), buy Father a bag of chestnuts.” I opened my purse, handed him some change and pointed to the vendor at the corner. Even though the boy didn’t understand what was going on, he obeyed me and ran toward the vendor. I approached the bus and hugged the officer, then apologized for mistaking him for my father. I opened my purse and flipped out my father’s picture.

The officer clicked his heels and smiled.

The other soldiers were teasing him, saying, nowadays the girls had many new tricks to pick up officers.

The officer boarded the bus, still smiling. I turned away and joined the boy who was holding a bag of hot chestnuts.

My teeth chattered as I looked back at the police cordon. Luckily, they were too busy to pay any attention to us.

I quickly told the boy to keep the chestnuts, gave him all the money I had, saving only enough for the streetcar fare, and urged him to go quickly wherever he lived, then bade him good-by.

“God bless you,” the boy said and scurried away.

While waiting for the streetcar, I followed him with my eyes until he reached the corner and disappeared.

The streetcar came shortly and was so crowded that I had no place to sit. I felt as if my chest were about to explode. When the streetcar picked up speed I lurched backwards, and hit my head on the steel bar. I must have looked sickly because a middle-aged man stood up and offered me his seat. I whimpered a “thank you” for his courtesy. It’s been my lifelong experience to keep my composure during a crisis, and fall apart only when the crisis is over. True to form, I now cried and felt nauseated. Disoriented and dizzy, I transferred to another streetcar, but took the wrong one. After changing, at last, I headed home. I avoided the store and staggered toward the apartment, hoping Aunty would be already home. I was exhausted by the time I rang

the doorbell.

Aunty opened the door. "What's the matter?" she worriedly asked, sounding like my mother. "Are you hurt?" I was weeping hysterically and didn't answer. She reached out to embrace me. I bolted out of her arms and ran toward the bathroom. She followed and held my head while I threw up. What could Ilka have served for lunch, she wondered. After washing up I told her about the police raid and the Polish boy, and pleaded with her not to tell my parents. Aunt Irma promised she wouldn't, although she was certain that they, too, would be proud of me for saving the life of a Jewish boy who surely would have been deported.

Zsuzsi came home later and praised me for my bravery. When Uncle heard about my adventure, he said I was lucky I left the money at home because those with unusually large amounts of cash were the most likely suspects for wrongdoing. Now I realized why the floor of the alley was packed with currency.

A cup of herbal tea was all I could swallow for dinner. Aunty suggested we call off our theater plans but I begged her to let me go. Suddenly I remembered the purse I bought for her. She was pleased, and advised we call my parents before leaving as it might be too late when we returned from the theater. I agreed to call as soon as I was ready.

I surveyed the dresses I had brought from home. I had wanted to pack a few fancy dresses, but Mother had discouraged me, asking what for? I wouldn't be going out in the evening. However, she allowed me to take a dark blue, wool georgette dress with a Venetian lace collar and cuffs.

Zsuzsi opened her wardrobe cabinet, lamenting she had nothing to wear. I heard Uncle remarking that the cabinet was so crowded that it would be impossible to place a tissue paper between the outfits.

Zsuzsi took out a pad and pencil from her desk and in a few seconds had sketched a fantastic dress. (The family always thought she would grow up to be a dress designer.)

Aunt Irma looked at the sketch, commented that it was very elegant, and urged Zsuzsi to get ready and put on a real dress.

Zsuzsi chose a deep-red, velvet dress with tiny, shiny black buttons. She looked lovely. Aunty wore a black wool dress with lace sleeves, and her beautiful jewelry. Uncle surveyed Aunty, candidly remarking that one day he would trade in the jewelry for a little house of their own. He said he was proud of his girls, including me in his expansiveness.

We called my parents, first agreeing not to tell them about the Polish boy and the raid. As I talked to Father about business, Mother picked up the telephone. My voice must have been shaky because she said I sounded as if I was coming down with something, and I should take the train home in the morning. I began to cry.

Uncle Gabor grabbed the telephone away from me and convinced Mother that she had nothing to worry about. On the extension telephone, I heard my parents talking it over. Mother spoke in a crying voice and I was ready to pack and leave. A moment later Father said I could stay another day.

"Listen, let us keep her until Friday, so she could have some fun. Back in the village she's getting moldy and turning into a bookworm. Let her enjoy herself. She is going to the theater tonight."

Father reminded him that these were not the times for fun. Uncle argued that this was even more reason for me to take what I could get. My parents agreed I could stay until Friday. I hugged and kissed Uncle, and danced around the table with Zsuzsi. Aunty also gave a kiss to her husband.

The doorbell rang five minutes before seven. One of the maids opened the door for Tibor. He was dressed as if he knew he was going to the theater.

He kissed Aunty's hands. Zsuzsi was flicking her fingers, hoping Tibor would notice and kiss her hands, but she was too young for that.

Tibor asked our choice of entertainment. Aunt Irma showed him the theater tickets. "You should have let me purchase them," Tibor said. I knew he was serious

about this, even if it meant he would have had to spend his last bit of money to pay for them. I guess he knew what I was thinking. He assured me that the factory paid him well. I told him we would give him another chance as Uncle had talked my father into letting me stay until Friday.

Tibor thanked Uncle for his effort and added if my father knew with whom I would be going to the theater, Uncle would be expelled from the family.

Uncle replied that the main thing was to enjoy ourselves now, as if my parents would find out, it would be a long, long time until they would let me come to the city, if ever.

In the streetcar, Zsuzsi reminisced of the old beauty of the city. She reminded me of the bright lights and how much I had enjoyed reading the electrical newspaper above Mussolini Square. The city was practically dark now. The old cabaret shows were closed because the Jewish performers were no longer permitted to appear there.

We passed the big nightclub which formerly was named, "Arizona." Now it was called by a silly-sounding Hungarian word. The big movie houses also had changed their American names. And the city square, which used to be named after a famous Hungarian hero, was re-named Hitler Square.

Zsuzsi said that a one-time favorite comedy star was in jail for telling a joke about the government. I wondered if the people of the city had changed with all the other changes.

We arrived at the theater only a few minutes before curtain time. I viewed the glitter and glow with awe. Aunty spied people we could read about in the magazine, *Theater Life*, which my mother used to subscribe for many years. Zsuzsi amused herself by guessing their identity. We laughed so loud that people stared at us.

We had good seats in the first row of our little box. I felt heavenly for being in the theater with Tibor at my side, and I blocked out all the misery of the outside world.

When the lights dimmed I giggled like a child in a field filled with fireflies. The curtain rose on my readiness to absorb all the pleasure I could, only the drama was

very difficult to follow. Tibor had a lot to explain to me. I wondered how could he pay attention to the play when he kept his eyes mostly on me? I told him we would have been better off if we had stayed at home.

The drama was old and good, but the actors had much to learn. Just as in every field, Jewish actors were replaced by green Aryan actors, with names like the first settlers of the country. Zsuzsi remarked they had to have prominent names, otherwise no one would ever notice them. Aunty recalled the better times when she had seen real actors on stage.

The first act's intermission gave us a chance to discuss the play. Zsuzsi said the players weren't actors at all, only puppets, and she wished to cut their strings.

Tibor excused himself to go into the lobby for a smoke. I wondered to myself if it was proper for me to accompany him. As if reading my mind, Aunty said it was all right for me to go along. We left, holding hands like children.

I told Tibor I was in a mood to criticize anyone who passed by. Tibor replied that he was waiting for me to say only nice things. I confessed I was jealous of this happy-looking crowd for they appeared as if they had nothing to worry about.

He asked if it ever occurred to me that many people would be glad to trade places with me. He pointed out a heavysset lady bedecked with furs and jewelry, who looked as if her corset were pinching her.

I smiled. Continuing with his game, Tibor called my attention to a middle-aged officer with a young lady at his arm. The man looked unhappy because she was flirting with a young officer.

"Look at that couple," he said. "They both have tattered clothing and scuffed, old shoes. I bet they had to skip many meals to scrounge up the price of the tickets."

He said if I could see inside their hearts, I would be surprised how many people are filled with misery, even though they act as if they were content.

"How about the Nazis? They have more happiness than they had ever dreamed of?"

Tibor said, very slowly, "Happiness that is based on hate is short-lived like the blossom of the morning glory."

The bell sounding the close of intermission brought our conversation to an end. We reached our box and as Tibor opened the curtain, he kissed my neck. I had to control my reaction to his sudden action. I trembled until the curtain rose.

The second act was dark and full of deep mysteries. I bothered Tibor with my questions frequently. He said he doubted that I understood the books he had given me.

To save face, I told him that the actors gave a poor interpretation of the characters in the play.

Aunty said I should become a critic.

During the second intermission we all went out for refreshments. Tibor smoked again, and said he was storing up for the third act.

I felt uneasy among the many men wearing Nazi and Arrow Cross insignias in their buttonholes. Aunty recalled the good old days when the men wore flowers or boutonnieres on their lapels, and horses and buggies instead of foreign automobiles stopped in front of the theaters.

When the third act ended, to avoid the rush at the exits, we walked out after the first curtain call. I never liked to leave the world of make-believe and fall back to reality. Now, with Tibor at my side, reality was better than the show.

He offered to escort us home but Aunty excused him because he lived on the opposite side of the city. It would take him several hours to make the trip.

Tibor asked Aunty's permission to call again the next evening. After receiving it, he kissed her hand. I had to be also satisfied with the same.

Wednesday morning Zsuzsi complained of a bad sore throat. Aunty made her stay in bed. However, Aunty was a bit suspicious, since Zsuzsi was a great actress. During her school days Zsuzsi always managed to be sick when she wanted to stay

home. She could excite herself to the point where she had a temperature.

I felt sorry for Zsuzsi, because I had to leave her alone during the day and catch up with the rest of my shopping. I did promise that I would be quick about it. I told Zsuzsi I would bring her some magazines.

On my way to the wholesale shopping district, I wished I would catch whatever illness Zsuzsi had, so I could stay longer in the city, and Tibor could come to visit me. Then I imagined the trouble a double illness would bring to Aunty and I decided not to get sick after all.

I stopped in a hurry at two more toy stores, without any mishaps. Then at the notions store the salesman tried to convince me to buy imported British thread and sell it on the black market. I told him plainly that my father was against black marketing. I walked out wishing I hadn't embarked on my errands during such a disheartening season.

I had one pleasant experience, though, during the next stop where I bought artificial flowers in small baskets from the leftover money. The salesman was courteous and left me feeling happy thoughts that the entire world wasn't evil.

I stopped at the newsstand to buy some magazines for Zsuzsi. The good old ones, which were owned by Jewish publishers, were no longer on the market. Some of the newspaper headlines made me nauseous. "Jewish housewife tortured her Christian maid." "An old Jewish rabbi forced himself upon a schoolgirl."

I grabbed a couple of magazines, paid for them and ran all the way home. Before reaching the entrance I slipped and fell. My purse opened and its entire contents spread on the slushy sidewalk. The magazines fell into a puddle. I tried to get up, but kept slipping back. Finally, I succeeded and stood on wobbly legs wondering how to salvage all my things. The magazines were soaking wet. I shoved the messy contents into my purse and limped to the elevator. The janitor warned I should see a doctor.

However, the doctor had already left the apartment. He had prescribed some

medication for Zsuzsi and told her to stay in bed until her temperature was down.

Zsuzsi was in a bad mood. She offered me her skates to go to the rink, but I told her I would rather stay and help her to feel better. When I laid out the magazines, she made a sour face and called me clumsy.

I sat near the fire, hoping the pain in my back would subside before Tibor arrived. It occurred to me that I wouldn't be allowed to go out with him alone. I offered to cancel my date but then Aunty asked to speak with Tibor. He handed me a couple of old books and said he had already purchased four tickets to a show. Aunty offered to go with Uncle and take the maids with them. If we would stay home, Zsuzsi could get dressed and we could play some games. I was relieved. Zsuzsi sat down to the piano, waiting.

Tibor and I had our favorite song, "*La Paloma*," from the American movie, *Juarez*. Tibor had played it on my mother's violin. I sighed and asked her to play "*La Paloma*."

The song was so romantic, it was so peaceful. I wanted, but dared not lay my head on his shoulder. I wanted, but dared not to embrace and to dance with him. Tibor sang the lines from the song, which in Hungarian translation meant, "My lover be mine, I'm asking for your heart. Come with me, my golden soul, to the place where I reside." Where is that place, Tibor? It was only in the song. In my bitterness, I was ready to cry.

Zsuzsi glanced at my face and changed the tune to a quick Hungarian *csardas*. I wouldn't allow Tibor to defeat me. I pulled the lace piano cover off and draped it around my shoulder. Grabbing a silver ashtray, I pretended it was a tambourine and danced like a gypsy.

Tibor never had seen me dance before. He stared at me while the ashes of his cigarette dropped to the carpet, and he didn't even notice it.

Next, Zsuzsi played my father's favorite Jewish ballad, "*Szol a kakas mar*." For those who heard only the words, it sounded like a love song, but the meaning was much deeper than that. It implied if the Jews waited long enough, God would lead them to the Promised Land.

Zsuzsi checked the fire, and said it was low enough to roast the apples and asked me to get the long fork from the kitchen. Tibor followed me. After closing the door, he embraced me. We kissed. I saw tears rolling down his face, some falling into the opening of my blouse, marring my skin. I wished we could run out into the snow and cool off what was burning in us.

A dreamy mood permeated the room. "Why should I die?" I thought. I deserve to enjoy love like anyone else.

After we finished eating the apples, we discussed the next day's plans which would depend on how well Zsuzsi felt.

Zsuzsi reminded me it was time to call my parents.

Tibor listened on the extension. He said he had talked often to my father officially. I suspected he admired him, even liked him, although he never told me.

Mother warned me to wear my boots as shoes were too slippery on the snow. Tibor snickered. I gave him a punch in his chest. Concluding our business talk, Father said there was someone else who wanted to talk to me. I thought perhaps it was cousin Juli.

"I kiss your hand," I heard Mr. Kertes' crackling voice. "I hope you are enjoying yourself. I miss you. I will be riding with the company carriage to pick you up at the railroad station."

Tibor's face turned red like paprika. It served him right for listening into other people's conversation.

Mother was back on the line. "Do I have to ride with him? I would rather take the autobus," I said to her.

"Yes," was her only reply. I guess she didn't want to give me a lecture about good manners in front of Mr. Kertes.

After the telephone call, I held onto Tibor's hand. We sat quietly by the fire and talked about our hopeless love, until the family returned from the movies.

Chapter 8

Thursday morning Aunt Irma suggested I pack my things as I might not have another time to do so before leaving the next day for home. I loathed to pack, and with my clothing my tears fell into the suitcase.

Zsuzsi made a comment about my frequent crying, then examined the books as I placed them into the suitcase. She touched the silken material and said it was too classy for the village.

After counting my money, setting aside a sum for the maids and for the taxi fare, I sat down at Zsuzsi's bedside. She said that in the future I should convince my parents to let me come only for fun and not for business.

The telephone rang. It was Tibor. As we talked, I wished he would say something cheerful, but his conversation was only perfunctory. He said he would be getting the afternoon off.

Since Zsuzsi was not well enough to venture out into the cold, she called her mother at the store for advice. Because this was my last day in the city, Aunty allowed Tibor to take me to the afternoon movies.

In my village only engaged couples were entitled to walk arm in arm. I saw our image reflected in the glass of the store windows as we passed. When Tibor linked his arm into mine, I felt as if we were doing something sweet and forbidden. While boarding the streetcar I asked him if he ever met anyone he knew on the street. He said it happened often in his neighborhood. I became curious as to just what kind of neighborhood he lived in. Tibor explained that the streets were narrow and dark

as if the people couldn't afford to pay for the sunshine. I was about to ask why he lived in such a place as he loved sunshine and fresh air when suddenly, it occurred to me that it was obvious he lived there because of the low rents.

"Have you ever been really hungry?" Tibor asked.

"Oh, yes. During the High Holidays when we fast a full day."

He smiled. "That's not what I meant. In my neighborhood people go to bed without dinner many nights each week because they have no money for food."

"What did the people do with their earnings?"

Tibor avoided the question, replying he had no intention to spoil the little time we had left together. Then he said, when he was hungry, he would sprinkle plenty of salt on a slice of bread, and drink lots of water to make him feel as if he had a full stomach. I tried to imagine what it would be like being married to Tibor, to live in a dark, dingy room, wash his dirty socks and eat salty bread for dinner. Is it true when poverty walks in the door, love flies out the window? I didn't have the answer.

We arrived early at the movie. Before the newsreel began, a sign flashed on the screen warning people not to express any opinion aloud as they could be arrested for doing so. The message reminded me of the precariousness of our situation, and it put a damper on my happy mood.

Tibor whispered, "I always want to jump up and shout, 'Even though you forbid us to talk freely, you can't forbid us to think.'"

We held hands. Suddenly Tibor said he had seen enough and was ready to leave. Being under the impression that he liked the show, I was surprised and told him that I wanted to stay until the end. He warned, in that case I would have to go home alone. I took his remark as a joke.

"So, go ahead, I'll find my way back," I bluffed. He got up and left. I made up my mind I was going to see the end of the show no matter what, figuring whatever was bothering him would disappear while he waited in the lobby. The show was over.

I walked out but I couldn't see him. I was agitated by his turn of mood, and left the theater to catch a streetcar. It came after a few minutes of anxious waiting. I was just about to board when someone grabbed me by my arm. I turned around. It was Tibor. I struggled to free myself and asked him to let me go. People gazed at us suspiciously. We ended up walking side by side, silently. The wind blew the wet snow into my face. I pulled up the collar of my coat as Tibor checked his wristwatch. Another streetcar passed us. My head began to throb. Tibor's behavior seemed so ridiculous, especially when I recalled him saying that he didn't want to spoil the little time we had together. We reached another streetcar stop. Tibor said I looked like a pouting baby, whose wish had been denied.

He kissed my hand through my glove and I had to smile. He thanked me for smiling. I asked why he walked out of the show? He said he suffered so much while we were apart that he promised himself he would hurt me when we met again.

I told him I, too, had been miserable, yet I had no intention to take it out on him. I broke away and rushed to catch the next streetcar. He ran after me and held me back, saying there was something else he wanted to talk about. Again, he glanced at his wristwatch. He said he wanted us to continue our correspondence.

"My parents forbade me," I said clearly so there wouldn't be any misunderstanding on his part.

"So you say. Now confess, is that what you want?"

I knew I was losing the battle.

He asked if we had the same mailman, and if Miss Farkas would mind if he

addressed my letters to her.

I told him I had to ask Miss Farkas. He accused me of not being anxious to receive his letters any more.

“Why do you want to write to me again, to punish me?”

Without replying, Tibor checked his wristwatch once more. We walked further and passed another streetcar stop. I told him I had no intention to walk home and he should allow me to board at the next stop. Instead, he offered to take me to a sweetshop and treat me to chestnut puree.

I refused, saying he only tried to detain me. He accused me of not obeying my inner voice, which surely was urging me to stay longer with him. I should let my true nature surface, he said. Instead of suppressing it, that way the struggle within myself would cease. We missed another streetcar stop.

I sneezed. His eyes clouded up. He looked at my feet and said he would hate himself if I became sick.

“Would that be a good punishment?” I asked, and we rushed to catch the next streetcar.

He glanced at his wristwatch again, an action that was getting on my nerves. “Why do you keep looking at your watch? Do you have another appointment?”

Tibor said it was a bad habit, but I told him that I had never noticed it before.

“It’s only a recent one.” His face turned pale. I was confused.

As we rode in the streetcar Tibor asked what would I say if he changed his shift and took me to the railroad station the next morning? I said it was up to him.

He replied that he already had changed to the night shift. I laughed, and he grabbed my hand. I pulled away explaining that I needed my hand for less romantic purposes, and pulled out a handkerchief from my purse. He took it away and wiped my nose.

In the hallway of Zsuzsi's apartment building, we stopped before ringing for the elevator. We embraced and kissed.

During the entire ride he kept asking, "Why, why, why?" I pretended not to hear him. I was afraid of the answer. The tension mounted between us. His face was ashen and his hands shook, yet he smiled when greeting Aunty at the door. She informed Tibor that his landlady had telephoned, urging Tibor to call the factory immediately.

Tibor asked to be left alone at the telephone and when we returned, we saw his face was drenched in sweat. He was fumbling to light his cigarette and missed it several times. He said he had to leave, and would call back as soon as he could.

"Are you in some kind of trouble?" Uncle asked. Tibor assured him there was no need to be concerned, and he left in haste.

I couldn't swallow one bite of food and paced the living room. Uncle took out a deck of cards and coaxed us to play with him. I was unable to concentrate on the game. All kinds of weird situations bounced in my head regarding the troubles Tibor could have gotten himself into.

"You act as if you suspect him of committing a hideous crime," Zsuzsi teased me.

"Don't think of the worst, my dear." Aunty gave me a hug.

"Listen, Tibor knows how to take care of himself," Uncle assured me and shuffled the cards.

Nervously, I concentrated on the ticking of the clock. I would have to call my parents. I feared that from my voice, Mother would sense there was something wrong. I suggested we delay the call until we heard from Tibor.

By eight o'clock I was so worn out from nervous tension that I didn't hear the telephone ring. I only saw Uncle Gabor pick up the receiver. The conversation was

brief, ending by Uncle saying, "See you soon."

"Relax." He rubbed my hair.

When Tibor entered the room, his first question was if I had worried about him. Winking at me, Uncle replied, "Not a bit." Tibor sat down and without lighting his cigarette, told us that there was a sabotage in the factory. A bomb had exploded in the engine assembly room very close to his workstation. The security officer wanted to know Tibor's whereabouts late in the afternoon.

"I told him I was at the movies with the boss's wife," Tibor said, and frowned.

For a moment I had a strange feeling that Tibor's unusual behavior at the movie, and his frequent looking at his watch might have had something to do with the sabotage, but I didn't dwell on the idea.

"Would it be better if I went to the train station without you?" I asked. Tibor laughed. He said there were about three hundred men working in his department and I was foolish to think there were that many policemen following the workers around.

Uncle excused himself and dashed for the bathroom. Aunty asked Tibor what would he have done if she forbade us to meet at her home? Without hesitation, he answered that he would have found a way.

Aunty hoped he would return soon and tell about the outcome of the events at the factory.

Tibor thanked her for her understanding and hospitality, and left.

Friday morning I arose with the first alarm. Everyone was already rushing about. Only Zsuzsi was sitting up in her bed, her face resembling a sad-faced clown as the corner of her lips curled down.

I finished the last-minute packing. Aunty gave me a package for her parents,

and I tipped some money to the maids. Then we hugged each other and waited for Tibor. He arrived early with a taxi.

Saying good-by to my relatives took only seconds and then Tibor and I were alone, knowing this togetherness would have to suffice for an indefinite time.

The taxi driver handed us a heavy blanket and Tibor put his arm around my shoulder, commenting that my thick, new fur coat kept him from getting really close. So he noticed. Not that I expected him to do so. Even though I had been wearing makeup every day, he had made no comment about it.

“At least take off your glove,” he pleaded. I removed my glove and he reached over with his other hand, and we held onto each other. I looked out the window. It appeared as if the taxi was going beyond the permitted speed limit. When I told this to Tibor, he said it was only because my heart was racing faster.

We sat silently for a few moments. I asked if he would write to his mother about our meeting. He said she would be happy to know, although while he was at home during the summer, she had introduced him to a young school teacher who had arrived recently to their town.

“Mother suggested I should take Anna more seriously to stop the gossip that was still circling because of the Jewish girl.”

“Doesn’t she know my name?” I asked acrimoniously, and it occurred to me that to her I would always be a Jewish girl.

Tibor removed his arm from my shoulder. We didn’t speak the rest of the way to the East Railroad Station.

While I bought my ticket, Tibor waited for me in the second class waiting room. I had stood in line for what seemed an eternity, and then I rushed back to be with him. We talked for a short while until I suggested that since the train was already on the tracks, we should find a seat and wait in the compartment until the

departure time.

But Tibor stood still as if he hadn't heard me talk. I reached for my suitcase and repeated what I had said. He pushed my hand away from the handle of the suitcase.

"I love you more than I have loved anyone on this earth. I implore you to prove to me that you love me too."

"Why do you need any proof?" I asked. "I believe you without asking for any proof."

His eyes were blazing and he talked with passion, begging me to stay with him in the city. He wanted me, not just to touch my hands or kiss me. He wanted the sum total of my whole being, not only for a stolen moment here and there, but every day. He wanted me when he opened his eyes in the morning and he wanted me at night, but not only in his dreams. He would find an apartment for us and we could live together like husband and wife.

I suspected he was delirious or drunk and told him he must have forgotten about the law that forbade intermarriages.

He shook his head. "*Like* husband and wife," accenting, "Like." I felt hot and almost ripped off the buttons of my coat. "Like?" I cried and exhaled with such anger, that my breath lifted a paper sign on the bulletin board near Tibor's shoulder. He stepped closer, reached under my coat and pulled me so tightly to his body, that my ribs hurt. I tried to draw away, to break loose, to wipe him out from my vision. He held me firmly and forced me to face him.

"I love you and if you say 'no,' I never want to see you again."

I was in such a rage that I felt like spitting at him and digging my fingernails into his face.

My eyes brimmed over with tears. I felt as if he had spilled dirty dishwater on

me. I only desired clean love.

“How dare you!”

“You don’t understand what it means to be a man. I am suffering on account of you.”

I tore myself away from his grip and shouted for the porter. He came right away and took my suitcase to the second class compartment. My walk was so wobbly that the porter asked if I was ill. I shook my head and paid him. Sitting in the compartment, I wished the train would pull out instantly, but there were still ten minutes before departure. I removed my coat, closed my eyes, lay my head back, and sat shaking and imagining lots of things I wished to do to Tibor. Killing him was only one of the mildest ideas.

The porter returned and handed me a folded piece of paper. I asked him if he was sure that the note was for me. He said he was sure. I opened the paper and read the familiar handwriting. “Forgive me. I love you. Forgive me.”

I tore the paper into bits as if I could tear him apart. I heard, “All aboard,” and felt so dizzy I could barely sit up straight. I saw Tibor boarding the train. He called my name. I expected him to burst in and I strived to escape toward the opposite direction. He entered before I had a chance to move.

“Do you forgive me?”

I shook my head. “No.”

He attempted to draw me to himself.

“Leave me alone,” I screamed. He released me and jumped off the moving train. I rushed to the window. He stood at the platform, crying.

I was astonished by Tibor’s behavior. One moment he acted as if he loved me, then the next minute he changed. By asking to become his, was he testing me? He knew the answer, he just wanted to prove to himself that he had the right to forget

me. Or maybe seeing how hopeless our lives were, he planned to make it easier for me to forget him. Or maybe he actually was overcome by physical desire? I was thoroughly baffled. I kept asking myself why he sent me the note? Why did he rush after me? Why did he want to embrace me? Why did he cry?

Either way, he was as confused as I was. Maybe it was for the better that it ended this way. This was my punishment for breaking the promise I had given my mother. I paid the price. I was going to forget him, I made myself promise.

As the train rolled along on the tracks, so my tears rolled down my face.

I had been traveling only a few minutes when a young soldier entered the compartment. I recognized him as our former clerk, Franki. I wished the bottom of the train would open and I would fall through and disappear. Even before returning his greeting, I asked Franki where he boarded the train. He replied, "In Budapest." I told him I hadn't seen him at the station, and he said he had to run to catch the train. Anxious to know if he had seen me with Tibor, I didn't have the nerve to come right out with it. Of all the people from our village, *he* had to be the one on the train. I knew he would be visiting us, and he knew how my parents felt about my association with Tibor. Franki loved my father as much as he did his own, if not more. Whatever my father said was holy to Franki, since Father had practically raised him. Father had the habit of helping simple peasant boys by taking them into our store and teaching them how to become businessmen. Franki obeyed my father more than my brother and I had.

I debated whether I could bribe him. Then I recalled when my father forbade me to ride my bicycle until I had finished my homework, he had put Franki on guard to make sure I obeyed. I offered Franki a bar of chocolate to let me go, but he refused. No, I couldn't bribe him now. I dreaded to think how many other people of my village could have boarded the train beside him.

Trying to make conversation, Franki began telling me some of his army experiences. I heard a word here and there and tried to behave normally. He said he could hardly wait to share his stories with my father. He had never been chased by so many women in his life. [...I should have said to Tibor...I thought.] Then I was back with Franki.

“It must be the uniform. Mother always said she was jealous of my father only when he wore his uniform.”

Franki said I was much prettier since he saw me last. I reminded him that he had never paid me a compliment before and it had to be because of the army life. Then my mind raced back to the station, fighting with Tibor.

The conductor arrived to check our tickets. He saw that Franki had a third class pass and chased him out of my compartment. Franki said he would look for me and would help me to transfer at Feherwar.

I had to wait an hour at Feherwar. I checked my luggage and walked around the station, trying to avoid meeting Franki, while my head buzzed with Tibor's last words. “I don't deserve this,” I tried to convince myself. Then it struck me. This was not only the penalty for disobeying my mother, but also God's wrath for letting Tibor back into my life. I could only bear the punishment in the same way as I enjoyed the forbidden game.

All ready to board the train for home, I still couldn't see Franki. In the second class compartment I recognized several people from our village. I begged God's forgiveness that none of them would have come from Budapest.

Mr. Mayer, our Jewish neighbor, saw me and came over to greet me.

“At the East Railroad Station I saw your former ...” He took a deep breath and I nearly died until he said, “Clerk, what's his name?” I exhaled with relief.

“Yes, I rode with Franki for awhile. He had to leave.”

“Yeah, I understand. He, wearing a uniform, was ashamed to be sitting with a Jewish girl.”

Now I knew I was getting close to home. Feeling as though a door of jail were closing on me, I said farewell to freedom, looked out the window and cried. If I would recall the time I had spent in Budapest, I would say I cried more in those few days than during the past year. This was entirely Tibor's fault.

Mr. Kertes was waiting for me at the station with a dark, canvas-covered, one hundred-year-old carriage. Franki asked to ride with us. Mr. Kertes hesitated at first, showing off with his position, and then allowed Franki to ride with the driver. Turning to me, Mr. Kertes said he craved to know everything that had happened to me in the city.

I told him he'd have to wait. He kept prattling all the way, but my ears were too full of Tibor's voice. The horses' hooves were beating a rhythmic sound on the frozen road. The wind was crying like the souls of dead lovers. I pulled up the collar of my coat and hid my face.

I thought, “Yes, Dew Drop did melt when she was confronted by the heat of Tibor's passion.”

Chapter 9

The carriage stopped in front of our house. Franki jumped off his seat, unwrapped the blankets, lifted me out and set me down on the sidewalk. While he carried the luggage into the house, Mr. Kertes told me to give a tip to the driver. I took that as an insult. He and his brother, just as the general before them, did not pay any rent. They used our electricity, our fuel and our linen. The least Mr. Kertes could have done was to tip the driver himself. So, let it be Mr. Kertes who didn't have proper manners. I gave the driver some money and marched into the house victoriously. Mr. Kertes trotted behind me. Mother must have been watching from the window because she was at the door already waiting. We hugged and kissed each other. Over her shoulder I could see the Sabbath candles in the freshly polished holders, waiting to be lit. The *barches* (holiday bread) lay beneath the white damask cloth and the fragrance of freshly cooked fish paprikash lingered in the air. Father would be home soon. I forgot the dark side of the day.

Mother asked Franki to stay until Father arrived. He said his family was also anxious to see him.

After the first barrage of hugs and kisses Mother suggested I rest before dinner as I must be tired. I was on my way to my room when Mr. Kertes popped into our living quarters. He had sent away his valet and informed Mother he had stayed home to hear my adventures in the city. She told him to come back later.

Mr. Kertes shouted as if he were the most important person in the household,

“Don’t start the story-telling without me.”

I went into my room, noticing a pot of purple cyclamen on my nightstand. Everything smelled so fresh, clean and friendly. I slipped into a housedress, made myself comfortable and lounged leisurely on the sofa, anticipating some rest. Mother sat down beside me and began to question me. Had I slept enough? Eaten enough? Did I walk too much? Travel too much? Did I wear a scarf? Was it perhaps too windy? And on and on.

When the answers were slow to come, she said I was as bad as my father because she had to use a pair of pliers to pull every word out of him.

“I had the impression that you wanted me to rest,” I said. She sat quietly for about a minute, then got up and started to open my suitcase. I was afraid that she would see the books Tibor had given to me in the city.

“Leave it alone, Mother, I’ll open it myself,” I shouted. Mother seemed surprised by the tone of my voice. She released the suitcase and gazed at me.

“You look so pale and tired. Your father should have listened to me.”

“I would feel much better if I could rest,” I said, faking a smile.

She finally left. I felt a headache developing from the excitement of the day. As it always happened in the past, either I had too much going on in one day, or nothing. Now I yearned for the “nothing at all” days.

I rose from the sofa and listened at the door. When I no longer could hear Mother, I opened the suitcase, removed Tibor’s books and hid them inside my clothes cabinet.

Father arrived five minutes after seven o’clock. I hugged and kissed him before he had a chance to remove his overcoat. His smile pleased me. He settled down and started to quiz me, although he didn’t ask as many questions as Mother did, reasoning that we should wait for the entire family so I wouldn’t have to repeat myself. I was grateful for his consideration.

After dinner I wanted to tell him about the business part of my trip, but he said he could wait for that. He patted me on the head and said he was proud of my business accomplishments. Later on, the family arrived. I handed over the package that Aunt Irma had sent to Grandma. Marishka called in Mr. Kertes. Everybody sat around, anxiously waiting while Marishka served mulled wine. I told them about the family, the movies, the theater, about the latest fashion, and the dim lights.

The wall clock struck ten. The fire burned lower. Juli fell asleep. Lacko acted as if he'd be up until dawn, but he hid a yawn or two with the palm of his hand. The family said good-by. From the door, Grandma made me promise to retell the story again on Sunday when Aunt Ella and her family were coming to visit.

Before retiring and after many hugs and kisses, Father told me to sleep as late as I wanted, but in the morning I awoke before anyone else. Being used to a different kind of schedule at my aunt's home, I was ready to start the day at dawn. I heard the bell of the early mail wagon, and Mr. Kertes moving around his room. Then my parents were making the morning noises, and I heard the clinks and clunks of the coal pail as Marishka lit the fire in my parents' room. The smell of freshly-brewed coffee wafted through the doors. I felt so safe and cozy. Falling back to sleep, I woke up at nine o'clock.

At the breakfast table Mother apologized for not mentioning the biggest news. During the week a train full of young Jewish men arrived. They would be stationed in the village with the Labor Corps. She already had met several of them in our store. I knew what was on her mind. She wished I would find myself a nice Jewish boy who would be willing to take over the business when Father got older.

The news about the young men made me recall the old adage, "Cure the dog's bite with the dog's hair," that implied if you had been hurt by love, love would cure you. And I wanted so much to be cured from Tibor. What could be better than having a

whole regiment of medication? I finished breakfast quickly and hurried to our store.

Even though our store was open on Saturdays, Father never missed going to the synagogue. When he saw me enter the front door he put on his overcoat and hat and said, "Good Sabbath," and was gone.

Miss Farkas glowed with excitement as she hugged and kissed me. Before I had a chance to ask what the excitement was about, she told me politely that she was anxious to hear everything that had happened in Budapest, only I should allow her first to tell me the local news.

I suspected it had to do with the arrival of the regiment, but I let her have the pleasure of relating the news to me. Using both of her hands to accent her words, Miss Farkas spoke rapidly, her features becoming ten years younger when she said that two young doctors from the Jewish regiment had moved into the guest room of her house. She befriended one of them, of course, not for herself (and she blushed even at the thought), but she had me in mind, she said. The other doctor was so extremely Orthodox that he wouldn't talk to women at all. Many of the young men were already in the store and Father had invited one Oscar Halas for Saturday dinner.

This would be one of those surprises Father would spring on Mother. He would invite people not only for lunch or dinner, but also for *tizorai*, the mid-morning meal, and the *uzsonna*, the four o'clock meal, without asking her first.

"Now let me hear about Budapest," Tereza said. I began, but customers arrived and the story was put on hold.

During lunch Father informed Mother about the dinner guest. Before food rationing Mother had made no fuss about an unexpected guest. Now she raised her eyebrows.

After the lunch hour, many of the Jewish young men drifted into the store. I talked to some of them briefly as at the store, business was supposed to be my main concern. One of the young men, Zollie, asked if I were a new clerk as he had been there several

times during the week and he hadn't seen me before. I let him believe I was the new clerk.

Zollie said he had heard that my boss's daughter was sophisticated, stuck up and too spoiled to work in the store. Even though I was shocked and wondered about the source of this information, I told him he was correct and began to add up the bill for the merchandise he had purchased. At the cashier's booth he talked with Father. He asked Zollie if he had met his daughter. Zollie replied he didn't have the pleasure.

"But she just waited on you," Father said, and laughed.

Zollie shrugged, paid for the bill, returned to me for his package and said I was a very pretty salesgirl, and hurried out of the store.

Just before closing time, our dinner guest arrived. Father introduced Oscar Halas to me and we headed home.

Mother was dressed for a party, she even wore makeup and holiday jewelry. Father complimented on her appearance. I couldn't eat, and felt my mother's eyes fixed on me as if she expected a marriage proposal at any minute. But our guest neither looked at me nor at Mother. No sooner was the after-dinner liqueur served when Oscar opened his wallet and took out a picture of his wife. They had been married only two weeks before he was drafted.

Mother's face turned pale. She must have been disappointed. I could already hear her scolding Father for inviting a married man. Father knew what was going on in her mind and explained that our guest was very religious and wouldn't eat the army food. I guessed he was one of those Orthodox men Miss Farkas had talked about. That was the reason why he looked only at Father. Oscar excused himself and left early.

A minute later Mr. Kertes poked in his ugly nose. He said he was having some elite company and requested my presence. I never could get used to him choosing complicated or fancy words when simple ones would have been as good.

“Do you feel like going?” Mother asked. I wasn’t too anxious, but I nodded. Mr. Kertes practically glided out of the room. I told Mother he acted as if he needed me for a decoration at his party.

I decided not to play his game and wore the simplest dress I could find in my cabinet. His guests arrived one by one. He had to introduce them to me as no one was from our village. Of course his girlfriend, Miss Szakacs, was also invited. She was decked out like an over-decorated Christmas tree. Her long face turned even longer when she saw me. The last guest to arrive wore the Hungarian Arrow Cross insignia on his lapel. I felt offended. This was more than I expected from Mr. Kertes. I picked up a couple of empty wine glasses and I left the room. Mother wanted to know if the party was already over. I told her about the insignia. She said, perhaps Mr. Kertes was unaware of the political affiliation of his guest.

Even in a case like this, my mother wanted me to have the benefit of the doubt that Mr. Kertes had made a mistake without malice.

She was right. Mr. Kertes must have waited for the room decoration to return. When I failed to show up he knocked on my door.

He apologized. It was Miss Szakacs who had invited the man with the insignia. He begged me to return and grace his party. I feigned a headache. He shook his head and rushed back to his guests. The party must have been rather dull because within an hour all the guests had disappeared.

Sunday morning, on their way home from church, Aunt Ella and her family came to visit. I retold the story of my trip. In the afternoon I wrote a letter to Aunt Irma, Uncle Gabor and Zsuzsi and thanked them for their hospitality. Mother added a few lines and told me to take it to the post office’s drop-off box. Before sealing the letter I wrote a postscript, thanking Aunty for her concern and added that Tibor and I had ended our friendship at the station.

My friend Eta lived close to the post office and since I knew she would be interested in the stories about Budapest, I decided to visit her. I found Eta, her sister Clara, their cousin, Anci, and Clara's friend Jozsa, working in the kitchen. They seemed to be disturbed as I entered, and whispered to each other. I sensed that I wasn't welcome but I didn't know why. Usually, Eta would invite me in, now she let me stay at the door. I used to play with Eta's baby sister, Veruska, every time I visited. Now Veruska told me she couldn't play because her sisters were expecting their boyfriends for tea.

Eta was putting sugar in a bowl and dropped the spoon on the table. She must have been upset and chased Veruska back to her room, explaining that it was nothing of the sort. I saw several large plates of finger sandwiches and tea cakes, that surely had the appearance of a party. Since I wasn't invited, I was ready to leave.

Mrs. Roth came out to the kitchen and called Eta into the living room. She returned and asked if I would like to stay for the party. Now she called it a party. I felt insulted, but I didn't want her to know. I said I had to return home because my parents would be worried. I was supposed to go on to the post office. Eta accepted my excuse very easily. I put on my gloves, wished them a good time, opened the door, and found myself face to face with six young Jewish men from the Labor Force. They blocked my way. One of them, whom I had seen at our store, asked why I was leaving. I felt like saying that I wasn't invited. Eta stood there, blushing.

"Evie has to go home. Her parents don't know she is here," Eta explained anxiously.

"Let's go and ask her parents," one of the young men suggested. They let me pass and every one of them turned around and followed me down the path to the gate. I thought that they were joking and would turn back at the gate. Glancing back, I saw the entire Roth household standing behind Eta. I figured if all the young men followed me, I

surely would lose my friend. I thanked the young men for their offer. They put up an honest effort to persuade me to change my mind, but I refused.

I told Mother what happened. She was very sorry, yet she wouldn't put the blame on Eta. It might have been someone else's idea to exclude me from the party.

"Sure, sure," I said, strutting into my room, and I slammed the door behind me.

Eta came to see me the next day. She told me without any apology that the boys belonged to the forbidden Zionist movement. Since my father was well-known for obeying the law to the letter, she knew she couldn't ask me.

That night at my grandparents' house we called Zsuzsi to wish her happiness on her upcoming birthday. When it was my turn to speak with her, she told me that Tibor had come to visit. He confided to Aunt Irma about the episode at the railroad station and asked for her advice. She told him it would be better for both of us if he would forget me completely. I had to put a steel clamp on my nerves to prevent myself from crying out. Luckily, cousin Juli was also present and she insisted on talking to Zsuzsi too. I went into the bathroom and cried.

The merchandise I had purchased in Budapest arrived daily and Father praised me as I told him the various stories. He liked the flower baskets. Some of the dealers sent us more goods than we expected. In turn, Father called the Schwartz sisters, the owners of a dry goods store in a nearby village, and offered them some of the bargains. Lena and Magda were well-respected by their village people, and came frequently to Father for his business advice. They also bought merchandise from him for a lower price which saved them a trip to the city.

Lena, the older of the two, entered the store. She was bundled up to her nose in a woolen scarf. Only her pale blue eyes were visible. She shook off the snow and was

ready to do business. Father made her sit down and asked Miss Farkas to brew up some linden blossom tea for Lena. After removing tons of warm wrapping a small, sturdy girl with long, blond hair, appeared. Even when she smiled, there was a mark of sorrow on her face. She conducted business while sipping the tea. She said she was in a hurry to leave as it had begun to snow and she was afraid of a blizzard.

Being so close to Christmas, business was brisk at the store. The days passed quickly. On the following Friday Father invited another Jewish young man to dinner. Erno was single and good looking. After the meal, he said he was very much interested in books. Mother suggested I show him my collection.

I was halfway to the bookcase when Erno grabbed my arm, forced me to turn toward himself and kissed me. I was so shocked I slapped his face. Erno explained how he was only curious to see for himself how I would react to a Jewish kiss, as he had heard that I loved only "Goyish" boys.

I felt as if I was picked up by a whirlwind and smashed against a wall. I told him to leave immediately.

"What should I tell your parents? Surely they would want to know what happened." Erno asked.

"Tell them you had to go back to the base."

After he left my parents were hardly convinced. They insisted to be told the absolute truth. At first, I hesitated, then I only said that Erno kissed me. Father jumped up from his chair and came right to me, shaking his fist. Not even when I was little did he ever hit me. Now I expected that he was going to slap my face. Instead, he wanted to know how I had acted that Erno was in such a hurry to kiss me? With tears in my eyes I begged him to believe that it wasn't my fault, and repeated what Erno had said.

"You should be ashamed of yourself for establishing a bad reputation among the Jewish men," he raised his voice. He expected me to remain an old maid for the rest of

my days.

I insisted what was between Tibor and me was nothing to be ashamed of. I must have been shouting because Mother told me not to talk back to my father. I answered I wasn't talking back, I only tried to defend myself and believed I had the right to do so. Father roared that I had the right to go to my room immediately.

I sat down on an armchair, feeling like a cluster of grapes in a wine press, squeezed on every side. Tibor didn't deserve the feelings I wasted upon him. I never was sure that he loved me. I was sure of my parents' love, though, and I returned to their bedroom and apologized.

Chapter 10

Nineteen hundred forty-three had been a year filled with events, best to be forgotten.

We were hoping for a better new year that would bring an end to the war, and an end to our persecution. For myself, I wished an end to the struggle in the field of love.

In January 1944, there were new, strict, regulations regarding air raid safety. The front gate had to remain open so the Mayers, and other neighbors who didn't own cellars, could rush in and find safety with us. Father had part of the wine cellar fixed up with the required equipment. We installed a table, chairs, cots with blankets, food and water supply, a first-aid kit, a portable toilet, shovels and lanterns. Father even brought down a deck of cards to keep his and the neighbors' minds occupied during air raids. Unlike Uncle Gabor, my father would never play cards with the members of our family. I carried down a couple of books and writing material. So far we didn't have any bombing, only warnings. Sometimes the card game was in such full force that it continued long after the off sirens had been sounded.

The regulations included setting up a night watch person from each household to alert anyone who might be a heavy sleeper.

Since I could sleep late in the morning, my parents decided that I should take the midnight watch. On the first night Mr. Kertes offered to stay up with me. Mother remarked that it was rather strange as he had to get up for work earlier than any member of the household. Because the fire had to be kept during the watch, she agreed.

Mr. Kertes brought a bunch of blankets into the front room and fed lumps of coal into the flames. First, we played chess, then he offered me a drink. I told him wine made me fall asleep. He drank solo and it appeared as if the wine affected him.

He said, although the whole village linked him with Miss Szakacs, he was in love with someone beyond his reach. I tried to restrain myself without much success and broke out in a silly snicker. Miss Szakacs was a head taller than Mr. Kertes, and now he was telling me about someone who towered above him. After composing myself, I pointed out that in love, such things as height and weight, shouldn't matter. Mrs. Mezak was much taller and heavier than her husband.

Mr. Kertes hinted it was more distance than size. This reminded me of the distance between Tibor and I, and it hurt me too much. I didn't ask where the target of his love resided.

After pouring himself another glass of wine, his face turned glowing red when he asked, "Do you want to know who the young lady is?"

I wasn't particularly interested in that either. However, being raised to be polite, I said, "Who is she?"

He took a deep breath. "I wanted to tell you for a long time. Promise you won't laugh," he mumbled and drank more wine. I assured him that I had no intention of laughing at love.

His next move surprised me. He approached my chair and sat on the armrest, putting his left arm on the upholstery above my back. This closeness was more than our relationship would allow. I gathered the blanket and was about to get up and move to another chair.

"Please, stay," he whispered and the way his voice trembled and his eyes sparkled, I knew this was more than overstepping the boundaries of etiquette. I was

annoyed. I drew in my shoulders and pulled the blanket tighter around my neck.

“I have been in love with you ever since I witnessed your fierce confrontation with the old army officer. Seeing you every day, and knowing I would never be able to touch you, and at night you were only a door away from me, my life has been continual misery. You were always close to me, yet you could have been living on an other planet. This is the night and this moment is so enchanting. We are alone, and I am begging only for one kiss.”

His voice was so comical, the expression on his face so silly, that I couldn't resist. I had to teach him a lesson. If there was such a thing as a devil prompting our actions, this had to be it. I teased Mr. Kertes saying, that in this part of the country men didn't ask for a kiss, they just took it. He opened his small eyes and his narrow lips widely, and mumbled, “Could it be?” He put the wine glass on the table, wiped his lips and asked if I were serious?

The devil in me replied, “Do you want me to put it into writing?” By then I knew I was going too far, still, I figured this was a good chance for me to punish Tibor for not loving me enough. Simultaneously, I would laugh at Mr. Kertes for acting like a fool.

He bent slowly toward me, gazing at my face, still hesitating, then he leaned closer to my mouth. I closed my eyes to avoid seeing his ugly face. I could smell the sour wine. The next moment he kissed me, first, softly like one kisses a child, then he stormed me with passionate kisses, like heroes in the novels I had been reading about. It occurred to me how long he must have hungered for this and now he wanted to take as much as he could before I would spoil the fulfillment of his dreams.

Finally, he sprung back like a wind-up toy. He thanked me for granting him a kiss, and said from now on I should call him Karoly.

Now I knew I was in trouble. Calling him by his given name would mean I was making our friendship more meaningful. I shook my head. He asked me what was

wrong. He believed I had the same feeling toward him as he had for me, and if he was making a false assumption, why did I allow myself to be kissed? He rose from the arm of the chair and paced the floor at a speed as if he were running away from himself. When he was again at my chair, his face hung down in shocking disgust. He said he was outraged by the possibility that I was the kind of a girl who allowed herself to be kissed without sincere feelings.

Listening to him, I knew that I was wrong. I got up and walked into my room and continued the night watch. Mr. Kertes paced the floor for about an hour until he gave up and went to sleep. I stayed in the dark, feeling miserable. I resented his remark that I was a bad girl. I wished I could ask someone what my next move should be. On the following day, when I tried to avoid him in the corridor and failed, Mr. Kertes acted in his usual silly manner as if the kiss had never happened. He might even have surmised that he had dreamed the whole thing.

In February, Uncle Harry was recalled into the Jewish Forced Labor Corps. The family was more than worried since Uncle Sandor had been reported dead, and the rumors were that Harry's unit would also be going to the Russian front.

Harry was a big man, a slow talker, slow thinker and slow at action. Seven years older than Giza, he married late in life. It was a *Shatchen* (marriage broker) who brought them together. They saw each other only once before the wedding. After the wedding they were so much in love that, they embraced and kissed each other often, even in public.

Aunt Giza had been very skinny before her marriage. Soon after, Grandmother fattened her up. Giza was born into an Orthodox family in a "one Jew" hamlet. She never had been inside a butcher shop. While educating her in the butcher trade Harry had shown her the various parts of the carcass by outlining them on her body. When

asked which part did she learn first, Giza admitted with a blush, that it was rump roast. Now Giza was beside herself. Grandma kept reminding her to have faith in God. When the moment of departure arrived, Giza kissed Harry and said she wasn't worried. He had been away from home regularly when going on buying trips, and his daughter, Juli, never put up a fuss when he left, not even when he had been called previously into the service. Now she acted as if she had sensed the difference. She grabbed hold of her father's leg and would not let go. Giza had to pry her off. Juli cried herself to sleep.

On the days that followed, Giza refused to eat. She said she had no appetite and she was losing weight rapidly. After Grandpa warned that she was setting a bad example for Juli, only then did Giza eat somewhat better.

At the end of February, when Uncle Harry was allowed to come home on a weekend pass, everybody laughed. Uncle, well known for his culinary talent, had been put in charge of the kitchen for the whole unit and he gained a tremendous amount of weight. He slept for two days and when he was about to leave, he made Giza promise she would continue to eat regularly for his sake.

On the first day of March, Joseph, who had left us in the fall, returned like a migrating bird.

Book Two

Chapter 1

On that cold morning of March 15, 1944, I awoke from a restless night. As I huddled beneath my favorite down quilt, I remembered my dream. I had seen an angel-like woman, clad in white, drifting through the folds of the curtains. Her face was covered with a white veil. In a weak, weeping voice, she begged for help. I saw blood on her shoulders, and on her gown. She explained that she had been injured in an air raid. I bandaged her wounds and gave her one of my gowns. She was grateful and offered to fulfill my fondest wish. I asked her to give me freedom. The woman expressed her sorrow because, freedom was the only wish she was incapable to grant. God alone possessed such power. She vanished the same way she came.

The wind rattled the shutters. I had an eerie feeling. Sinking deeper down below the quilt, I tried to sort out the meaning of the dream. Today was Freedom Day, a national holiday to commemorate the Hungarian uprising of 1848. It was also my birthday. There had to be some connection between the significance of the day and my dream. Grandma used to tell us what certain figures represented in a dream. We knew she wasn't serious about it, yet I wished there would have been an interpreter of dreams when reality was difficult to endure.

A few minutes later, I heard some noises at my door. Marishka tiptoed into my room to light the fire. She closed the window and worked quietly. As soon as the flames were strong enough to fend for themselves, she left the room. Shortly thereafter, when the heat chased out the coldness of the night, my mother entered. She leaned over me, wanting to make sure I was awake before she spoke. I reached up and kissed her.

“Congratulations on your birthday, my dear,” she said. She felt soft in her morning robe. I inhaled the gentle scent of her perfume, which followed her as if it were a friendly companion.

In the warmth of her arms, like when I was a child, I told her about my dream, and asked if she had any idea what it meant. She shook her head.

“Would Father know?” I asked. The loving smile on her face faded. She told me not to mention the dream to Father. It would hurt him for sure. He loved to give all there was to give to his family, but just like the angel, he couldn’t give me freedom.

I should have known better. One year before Emery became ill, his best friend had a chance to emigrate to England, and asked my parents to allow my brother to go with him. Father was aware of the deadly deeds of the Nazis, yet he believed those things would never come to Hungary. He forbade Emery to be free and then, and then, Emery died. Yes, it would have been cruel to tell Father about my dream.

At breakfast, as each previous year, Mother retold the story of my birth. In honor of Freedom Day a brass band played before the church across from our house, just as I was born. Mother had felt as if the whole world celebrated with her. At this point she reached for her coffee cup and drank. I knew she wasn’t going to finish the story, which she always had done before my brother had died.

Emery had brought his toys to Mother’s bedside and expected to play with his new baby sister right away. When he saw me, he was disappointed, and hid behind the couch and cried.

Father must have remembered the same scene. Instead of buttering his croissant, he spread the butter on his fingers. Being a man of precision, he was frustrated by his mistake, and attempted to smile. The tension persisted among us.

The loss of his beloved son never diminished, no matter what kind of face he tried to show.

We breathed easier when Mr. Kertes entered. I was almost glad to see him. Grinning in his usual foolish manner, he handed me a potted hyacinth and congratulated me on my birthday.

Mother asked him to join us. He was pulling up a chair for himself when Father and I excused ourselves to leave the table. Missing a fine breakfast, Mr. Kertes withdrew sadly into his room.

Father and I dressed quickly, kissed Mother and left the house. I followed him uphill, panting, as he was walking fast with big strides, and wished that just once I could keep up with him. Miss Farkas was already waiting at the store. She, too, remembered my birthday and wished me well.

Business was slow in the store. It would pick up after the parade and when the people would come out from church services. I loved to watch the parade. When I was little I believed the celebration was for me, and when I grew up, I still pretended. Since the war, the celebration was sparse. Now, the brass band played and paramilitary men marched up the stairs of the German Catholic Church. There were no speeches, no patriotic songs and no poem recitals.

Sure enough, many customers strolled in later. Most of them asked about merchandise we were no longer allowed to sell. Sarah Spielman, a spinster and a classmate of Miss Farkas, was one of them. She came in to browse, and asked for a specific fragrance of imported eau de cologne. Not finding it, she walked out of the store. Miss Farkas frowned.

We closed the doors of the store at noon. Because of the holiday, we remained closed for the rest of the day.

Food was becoming scarce, yet my favorite noonday meal awaited me on my birthday. We had golden hen soup with fine-cut noodles, roast goose with tiny potatoes, and cabbage salad. Mother had set aside a jar of cherry compote especially for this day. She also had saved up the sugar rations to bake me a Dobosh Torte.

After the meal my parents gave me a salmon-colored, long, satin nightgown, and two sets of linen towels. These would be stashed away toward my dowry in a hidden drawer in Mr. Kertes's room.

Mother never missed her afternoon rest and while she napped, I walked over to visit my grandparents.

Cousin Juli sat by the window and waved to me. When I entered the verandah, "Here comes the birthday girl!" she shouted. Grandmother gave me a big hug. Grandfather, with his bull-like voice roared, "Happy Birthday, Miss Europe!," and smacked a mushy kiss on my forehead while his thick, white mustache tickled my nose. My bones crunched from his powerful embrace. Grandmother slipped her tiny hands beneath his strong grip and said, "Poppa, do you want her to grow up in one piece?" She squinted with her twinkling, pixie blue eyes. Shaking her head, her braided, black bun on the top of her head also shook, the hairpins falling to the floor.

"Let me have some, too," chubby Juli wiggled herself into the action. Aunt Giza stood laughing, and I felt good to see her so. Ever since Uncle Harry had been taken into the Labor Force she seldom smiled.

"Come here, Sweetie," I reached out for Juli and kissed her dimpled, rosy cheeks.

I received a lovely golden bracelet as my gift, then, repeating the hugging and kissing scene, I soon was on my way home. Meeting Aunt Ella, Uncle Ignatz, and

their daughter, Erika, along the way, we walked home together. From them I received a box of hard-to-get chocolates, and a ring of figs. I loved the chocolates, hated figs and would give them later to Marishka.

Aunt Margit, more fragile than ever and her son, Lacko, brought me a “Herend” porcelain figurine I had been admiring in their store display for several months. A little later, Miss Farkas and her sister, Elizabeth, stopped by. Elizabeth was a naturalized American citizen. She had come with her children to visit their family before the war, and could not return to America. They brought me a paperback edition of Petofy, Hungary’s most famous poet and freedom fighter. I was thrilled because Petofy was one of my idols I wished to emulate.

Mrs. Mezak joined us with a bottle of sweet wine. By four o’clock, I was getting tired. However, my friend, Eta and her sister, Clara, knocked on the door.

Marishka, wearing a stiffly starched, white kerchief on her head and a lacy, white apron over her dark blue Sunday dress, served us tea and biscuits. Knowing how much I loved to read, my friends brought me Stefan Zweig’s novel about the French queen, Marie Antoinette. They examined my other gifts, and my collection of books which both were in the habit of borrowing. Eta ran her index finger across the titles on the spine of the books, and stopped at a Hemingway novel.

“THE SUN ALSO RISES, I haven’t read this one,” she said. I told her that she could take it home with her. When they were ready to leave, I escorted them to the door, returned to the window and watched them walk out the front gate. I heard the ringing of the horse-driven mail wagon. The lilac bushes at the fence were still too bare to hide the street and I could see the wagon had halted in front of our gate. A passenger jumped down into the melting snow. A dark figure walked through our gate and up the path leading to the house.

"Oh, my God," I sighed, and slapped both of my hands to my face, and knocked my forehead on the cold, moist glass of the window.

It was December when I had last seen Tibor at the Budapest railroad station, and he had asked me to prove that I loved him. His question had been plain. I was hurt then and was still hurt. Why he came back, I had no reason to guess. His head bent, his shoulders drawn in, Tibor walked hesitantly, doubting, that he was doing the right thing.

"I never want to see you again," I recalled his words at the East Railroad station. Now he was here, coming toward me to inflict more pain and more suffering.

I turned back to my room, where the remnants of the tea party still cluttered the table. I wanted to reach the front door before my parents sent him away. As I entered the room, Marishka was already announcing:

"A gentleman is at the door, should I let him in?"

How could she forget his name? I stopped abruptly as if I had just reached the end of the pier and a stormy sea were gaping at me.

Father lifted the curtain and looked out the hallway. He let the curtain drop and faced me. His bright, blue eyes turned dark and angry. The cigarette burned between his teeth, and some ash fell on the carpet.

"What is that shegets (gentile man) doing here?" Father asked.

I felt as if hot, volcanic ashes were falling on me. For support, I held unto the back of Mother's chair and my knuckles turned white.

"I don't know, Father," I said quietly.

"Shall I let him in?" Marishka asked and her usually pink cheeks turned bright red. Mother stood up to face Father eye-to-eye, a twenty-five-year-old silent communication between them. Father caught her meaning and told Marishka to let

Tibor enter.

It took so long for Tibor to clean his shoes, remove his hat and coat, and reach the doorway that I aged from being nineteen to becoming ninety-years-old.

Tibor walked in with the air of a doomed man. His black eyes narrowed as if he were afraid to face us. His lips were stiff even while displaying a forced smile.

"I kiss your hand," Tibor said the customary greeting. To my surprise, Mother did not extend her hand. His shoulders shook slightly as he tried to maintain a calm appearance.

"Good day," Mother said, and sat down.

Tibor took two steps toward Father who was busily lighting a cigarette with the stub of the one that he had finished. To me it felt like an hour until he reached out to shake Tibor's hand. Father said, "Day" as if he didn't want to wish him anything good.

Tibor turned to me, and the room turned around me.

"I kiss your hand," he said. I was too scared to give him my hand. I stood motionless. We were so close I could smell the strong scent of his tobacco. We stared at each other, and a decade passed.

Mother, a proper hostess, was the first one to regain her poise and told Tibor to make himself comfortable.

He practically fell into the chair, and said he walked halfway into the village. Father asked dryly if he had seen the autobus. Tibor said he had.

I understood why he walked. He probably was short of cash. He never had money for such essentials as food or clothing, he had spent it on books. I suspected he owned more books than our ancient village library.

Mother asked Tibor if he would like to have a drink, and he accepted the offer.

Since the better glasses which we used for guests were stored in a cabinet in Mr. Kertes's room, Marishka had to fetch them.

Sensing that wine would be served, Mr. Kertes followed Marishka. Father introduced him to Tibor. Kertes scrutinized Tibor, then turned to me and his face flushed. Even though he loved wine, he mumbled a few words that nobody could understand, and backed out from the room.

Tibor only drank a small amount of wine when Father asked what brought him to our village. Tibor explained that his company had sent him to Feherwar for an eight-week course, where he would be learning about the latest designs of airplane engines. Being a holiday, he had the chance to find himself an apartment. Since he was so close he took the liberty to see us.

Father stopped smoking, like he used to when he was impressed. Tibor expressed his displeasure of working a job that would extend the war he despised so much.

Tibor drank some more and glanced at his wristwatch. He and Father talked about the war until finally, Mother motioned to me with her eyes, asking if I wanted to go into my room with him. I was afraid of the first sentence Tibor might say to me when we were alone, and signaled to Mother that I would rather stay. Again, Marishka appeared and said that Dr. Berren was in the yard, talking with Joseph.

"He is probably complaining about his backache," Father said.

"How about showing Tibor your new books," Mother said seriously, not accepting "no" for an answer. Obediently, I walked into my room and Tibor followed.

Once inside I wondered if it would have been better to leave the door open, but knew that Dr. Berren would come in, and I slammed the door. Tibor scanned the room. Seeing my gifts, he congratulated me on my birthday and apologized for not

bringing me anything. He reached to his neck, removed a necklace and unhooked a tiny, golden, heart-shaped locket.

“Yes, you could have this, if you wish,” and handed me the locket. I opened it and saw a tiny, dried-out rose, the last bud of the blooming season. I recalled he had bitten off a bud from one of our rose trees. The idea that he had been carrying the locket over his heart for two years, touched me deeply. I had to force back my tears. I thanked Tibor and told him to sit down. He rolled the walnut chips on the tablecloth between the empty cups.

“Have some biscuits,” I said. The way he devoured them made me think that he had been starving for days. After he finished, I mustered enough nerve to ask why did he come? His look was so piercing that I was afraid of him.

“Do you mind if I smoke?” I told him he could. After a couple of long draws, he blew out the smoke, and asked,

“Why do you hate me so much?”

I moved a few steps closer to him. “I don’t hate you,” I whispered. “I never hated you. I just wasn’t ready for the kind of relationship you had offered me.”

“Yes, it was wrong of me to think that you were mature enough. Forgive me.”

“O, God, how I wish that you hadn’t accompanied me to the railroad station.” My body trembled.

“God? I told you before, there is no God.”

“I’m sorry.” By then, tears swelled up in my eyes.

“Does that mean, you still care for me?”

I nodded and sank into a chair. Opening the palm of my hand, I looked at the locket. Tibor leaned over me. He put one of his hands on my shoulder. With the other hand he pulled my hair aside. “My dear Dew Drop,” he whispered and kissed

the nape of my neck. I shuddered. His sudden move was more than I could bear. I had to get away. I got up, and walked toward the cabinet. He followed me, smiling. I sighed. "There is no way out for me," I said and smiled too. The little locket became hot in my clenched hand. I turned the key in the glass door of the cabinet, opened it and placed the locket behind a bouquet of porcelain violets Dr. Berren had given me for my last birthday. Tibor stood beside me, holding onto the door. I noticed there was something covering the center of the face of his wristwatch, and I asked what was there. He hid his hand behind his back. I insisted on seeing. I saw my picture pasted on the glass, and was curious to know the reason why it was there. Tibor explained he had to check his watch frequently, and expected that my face would soon become just another number, easy to forget.

"Did you succeed in turning me into a number?" By then I was fuming over his constantly-changing behavior.

"You silly girl, would I be here if I had?"

Tibor tried to come near me. I pushed him away and escaped toward the window. "You came here to call me silly?"

"Of course not. Before leaving Budapest I had a long talk with my friend, Dr. Celle. You remember him?"

"Vaguely, he is the one who carried a secret radio station in his doctor's kit."

Tibor's face turned red. "You never heard me say that about him." He bit his lips and clenched his fists.

"No, I didn't. You only mentioned that he had ways of knowing things about the war. I was only joking."

"He told me something that is vital to your life." Tibor began to pace the floor.

I recalled Tibor once gave me a medical book from Dr. Celle. It was about the

way female physical functions affect the mood of women. Mother, a self-acclaimed censor of my books, got a hold of it and was furious. I was worried that Tibor had similar ideas, and I didn't want to hear them. Just to change the subject, I asked him to look at my new books.

"Listen to me. It is not what you think."

I was fed up with Tibor. I checked the wall clock and warned him that the mail wagon would soon return.

"Relax, I'll leave when I hear the ringing of the bell."

I heard a door being closed and Mother said, "Sit down, Dr. Berren."

"I came to wish Evie, birthday happiness. Where is she?"

"She has company," Mother said.

"Eta Roth?"

She said something quietly, but the doctor's angry reply penetrated through the door.

"For what hell do you allow that dirty nyilas (member of the Hungarian Arrow Cross Party) into your house?" Dr. Berren shouted. Tibor and I faced each other and I wanted to die.

Again, Mother said something and the doctor shouted,

"It is better if he hears me. If you don't throw him out, I will."

Tibor ripped the door open and stormed out. I rushed after him. He didn't slow down to say good-by to my parents, only waved. In the hallway he put on his hat, grabbed his coat and slipped it on while dashing down the path. Marishka was standing on the patio, talking with Varga, Mr. Kertes's valet. When she saw me, she removed her shawl from her shoulder and threw it on me. I caught up with Tibor at the gate and blocked the door.

"Please forgive the doctor, he is drunk. Ever since the forced divorce from his Christian wife, that man isn't himself anymore."

"No, he made the point." Tibor reached for the door handle.

I reached for his hand. "Tibor, I love you," I whimpered. His angry glance made me quiver.

"There is a bad storm brewing, and I came to warn you, but it is no use."

I looked up at the clear, cloudless sky and wondered why he should make such a remark.

"Tibor, you are confusing me. Didn't you hear what I've said?"

"I heard."

I trembled so uncontrollably, that I had to lean onto the door post for support. As I turned I saw the curtain moving from Mr. Kertes's window and I wished that the devil would take him.

The brisk March wind brought the sound of the mail wagon's bell.

"I have to go. Let me out!" Tibor commanded. He didn't sound upset, only sad. I stepped away and let him open the door. He rushed out and waved to the driver.

"Maybe it isn't too late," he said.

"Late for what?"

He turned toward me. We embraced and kissed.

"I'll write to you," he whispered and hurried into the street and climbed up to the side of the driver.

I stayed at the gate and focused my eyes on the wagon until it was out of view. The bell rang softer and softer. I cried louder and louder.

Miss Koch, a spinster and the gossipmonger of the village, came out of Miss

Varro's yard. She must have seen us kiss. I remembered while Tibor still worked in the village, Miss Koch, another postal clerk, caused him ample trouble for ignoring her and being associated with me. She was the one who told Dr. Berren and the other Jewish people in the village that Tibor was a member of the Arrow Cross Party, while to the gentiles she said he was a communist. Those days her malicious remarks bothered me more than they did Tibor. For a moment, I hoped she would mistake me for Marishka. The heavy shawl, that the peasant women wore instead of overcoats, reached way below my knees. But I was certain that she recognized me and would wag her sharp tongue again. I was right.

The following day she came to our store and after she left, Father grabbed my arm and dragged me into his office. He gave me a lecture that made the roots of my hair tingle. His massive body shook as he towered over me and his voice became louder with each word. When he finished, his face became pale. He fell back into the chair at his desk and held his chest, groaning.

I despised myself for causing him pain, and I wished he would let me explain that even though I tried to forget Tibor, I had no control over love.

Mother was more understanding although I suspected she cried when she was alone. Grandfather mourned his daughter, Ella, as if she had died when she had married my Christian Uncle Ignatz. Now Father was all worked up. He said he would rather die now than having to mourn for me. Rabbi Stern called me a traitor, who sided with the enemy. He always preached compassion toward those who hated us, but now lumped together all Christians. He made them guilty the same way they made all of us guilty. Eta said it was better not to have any boyfriend than to have an uncivilized goy. Dr. Berren, who helped me through many of the childhood diseases, said, he wished that he hadn't. I understood their point of view,

we were bitter and suffered dreadfully from persecution and from unjust laws. The majority of the gentiles agreed happily with the government when it put another link to our chain. Yet I knew the kind of love I felt for Tibor had no boundaries as far as race, religion or political affiliation were concerned.

Then I wondered about Tibor's mysterious behavior, and about the warning he never had a chance to deliver. The uncertainty only lasted until Sunday, March 19.

Chapter 2

On Monday, the gossip about Tibor kissing me was completely forgotten. Early in the afternoon, at our store, Father was working on a crossword puzzle, Miss Farkas waited on a customer, and behind the cosmetic counter I was submerged in the reading of my new book about Marie Antoinette.

Suddenly, the building was shaking. Windows rattled. The floor was trembling as if some heavy machinery were approaching. I put down the book and listened. Miss Farkas ran to the door, and made the sign of the cross over herself. The customer left the store in haste.

Father peered over his eyeglasses, then jumped up and rushed to the window. With the eyes of a military man, he gazed and his face turned ashen. Although the cigarette fell out of his mouth to the floor, he let it burn. He clutched his hands to his chest and stumbled backward against the glass showcase.

I tossed my book on the service counter and ran to his side. He lifted one arm and pointed to the street. Huge German tanks were rolling up Railroad Street. Roaring army vehicles followed them. Infantrymen, heads held high, boots hammering the cobblestones, marched as if they already owned the afternoon. Children were skipping and jumping happily along the way as if they were watching a circus parade. At the curbside, the *Schwaben*, the Hungarian-born Germans, were waving their handkerchiefs.

"Unsere Brueder, " "our brothers," they were shouting.

"Their brothers, but our executioners," Father moaned.

What did Father mean? How could they be our executioners? Only criminals get executed. I kept seeing men, human beings, sons, father, brothers, marching. Suddenly, it struck me that this had to be the important warning Tibor had come to tell, and never was given a chance to deliver.

“O, God, help us,” I cried and reached out to Father. I saw his eyes were hazy. He embraced me, and I clung to him. He stroked my hair to comfort me. His closeness meant safety. As in the past, I knew he would protect me. We stood there, two bodies, only one statue, welded together by fear. Neither of us moved until two German soldiers entered the store. To me they appeared faceless, I only perceived their uniform. But Father stepped away from me. Standing at military attention, trying to show how proper he was, he raised his right hand, ready to salute another military man. But he could not complete the gesture. His arm fell like a broken wing of a wounded eagle. The theory, that the Germans would never come to Hungary, had collapsed. Now, his error in judgment came to haunt him.

“Close the store, Jew, and hand over the keys,” commanded one soldier, while the other took the rifle off his shoulder and waited.

Without a question, Father obeyed. I could see his hand shaking as he reached for the keys behind the cashier’s boot. He stepped outside and locked the doors one by one like a robot. The soldiers followed him and pulled on the locks to make sure they were closed. Father returned and while the soldiers were still busy with the locks, he slipped vault keys to Miss Farkas, whispered the combination, and told her to grab the important papers from the top shelf, the folder with the paper money from the middle shelf, and the jewelry from the bottom shelf.

Miss Farkas trembled too. She rushed into the office and put on her heavy coat. I heard her whimper, “Virgin Mary, Mother of Mercy, help us.” The soldiers were back at the front door when she came out from the office. One of them stopped

her.

“Ich bin niche eine Juedin,” (“I am not a Jewish woman”) she uttered. The soldier let her pass. She walked out of the store, looked back only once, and ran.

Father and I put on our coats, boots and hats. Then he took a visual inventory of his life’s labor, his life’s pride. He held my arm and we stepped out to the slushy sidewalk. Remembering my book, I dashed back to the store. *“Nein, nein,”* (“no, no”) a soldier hollered at me, but he was too late. Within seconds, I was at my father’s side, clutching the book, with empathy for the unfortunate French queen who had lost her head. Father locked the main entrance and handed over the keys. One of the soldiers grabbed them out of his hand and marched away, grinning. Father touched the wood paneling gently with the tips of his fingers, as though bidding farewell to a loved one.

We hurried away, not looking back. Holding hands, we practically flew down the street. We passed by my grandparents’ house, slipping and stumbling in the melting snow. I dropped my book, the cover became wet. Father picked it up and handed it to me. He mumbled something and we kept on running. When we reached our gate, he let go of my hand, tore the gate open, and sped uphill to the stairs of the house, taking two steps at a time. He opened the front door in such haste he didn’t even reach to kiss the *Mezuzah* on the door post. He kicked off his overshoes.

Marishka jumped up from her chair at the kitchen table, ready to take his coat. Her mouth was slightly open in surprise. She didn’t speak.

In my parents’ bedroom, Mother was sitting on the sofa, holding a prayer book in her hands. She looked up. Father bent toward her and kissed her tear-soaked face. I kissed her too. We tossed our hats and coats onto the bed. She handed an open prayer book to each of us. We sat beside her silently. She turned to her book. Her lips moved soundlessly. Father only stared into the page, but he

didn't read. I read the prayer.

"Thou art my shelter. Thou wilt preserve me from trouble."

Why was I in trouble? What did I do? Why is the bogeyman going to get me? I stopped reading.

Mother kissed the page she had been reading, closed the book and put it on the table.

"God is going to be with us," she said with infallible faith. Father put down the book. He paced the bedroom, clutching his hands behind his back. Once in a while he turned toward the window, listening, then continued. The wall clock ticked loudly, beating the minutes into our brains. Father halted in front of the clock, opened the glass door and stopped the movement at five minutes to four.

"I think we should get ready," Mother said. She called for Marishka and asked her to bring in the largest suitcase she could find.

When Marishka returned, Father placed the suitcase on a chair, near the clothes cabinet. Opening the lid, he held it while Mother took out various items of clothing, folded and packed them into the suitcase. Then she shook her head, removed what she just put in and replaced them with something else. She made very little progress.

"Bring me some of the things you want to take along," she told me.

"Where are we going?" I asked.

"I don't know," Mother said.

I wondered, what shall I take with me? Is there any time to decide and choose? Several books lay on my nightstand, near the window. I was sure Mother had something else on her mind. I looked out and saw the gate opening. A poorly-clad, teenage peasant boy was leading a German soldier up to the house.

"It is too late to pack," I cried and rushed back to my parents, "A soldier is

already coming." I ran to the window and drew the curtain slightly. A soldier, close to my age, walked up the stairs. His face was dotted with pockmarks. He wore an ill-fitting uniform and his boots were covered with fresh mud. The boy was grinning. He pointed at our front door, as if he were doing something splendid, expecting to receive a prompt reward.

I let the curtain fall and joined my parents. We clung to each other tightly. I could feel my mother's heart pounding. Father was breathing laboriously. "*Shema Yisroel*," like the Jews before him, he called upon God.

Marishka appeared at the door. "There is a soldier here," she cried. "I don't understand what he is saying."

Marishka hailed from Hungarian stock, spoke no German. We understood, however.

"Come as you are," commanded the soldier from the door. His voice was firm and he stood as erect as a general and not as an ordinary private. He held the rifle up close to his body as if it were grown onto him.

We stepped out from the bedroom. "Where are you taking us?" Father asked in perfect "Hoch Deutsch" (High German). The soldier shrugged.

"You are going to Dr. Molnar's house and there you'll get shots of poison." The boy talked with much authority.

"You don't know that," Mother tried to quiet him.

"I do, I saw it myself." The boy resented the challenge.

Mother turned to Marishka. "Please, get me my coat and watch which way he is taking us. If you see us going down the street, toward the railroad station, pack some of Eva's clothing and some food and bring it after us."

Marishka stood, whimpering into the corner of her apron.

"Go," Mother said.

She brought Mother's coat, hat, scarf and gloves, and helped her get dressed. Mother picked up her purse and lay all her keys inside, while Father and I put on our coats. My hands shook so badly that I couldn't button up my coat.

"Out, Jews!" the soldier shouted impatiently.

"Yes, out Jews!" the boy echoed.

"That runt," I mumbled and stepped out to the corridor.

We kissed the *Mezuzah* and walked down the stairs into the yard.

Marishka was at the door, twisting the corner of her apron again. "God be with you," she cried, then covered her face and ran inside.

I began to shiver as soon as we were out of the gate. Mother was shaking too.

"Loss, Loss," urged the soldier.

Although I spoke German well, the expression, "*loss*" was unknown to me until he demonstrated what he meant by hitting me on my back with the butt of his rifle. I grasped then he meant that I should hurry.

We headed uphill toward the center of the village, the boy hopping around the soldier like a happy puppy. The soldier ignored him.

I gazed back at our home and saw Varga walk through the front gate.

On the street the neighbors were rushing by. They didn't greet us. Even though the March wind wasn't too harsh, they were holding their collars and shawls up to their faces, peeking out curiously only for a moment, then covering themselves up again.

"I'm embarrassed for being under guard like a criminal," I whispered to Mother. Not watching where I was going I stumbled into a ditch, and to make me rise faster the soldier jabbed my back with the point of the bayonet. I was hit, yet Mother's face became distorted. She felt my pain and cried out, "My child!" Father

helped me up, grunting, "I wish I had a rifle."

We were led up Wekerle Street, around the towering Catholic Church, through several narrow side streets and arrived at Dr. Molnar's house. The yard was already filled with Jewish people, although I didn't see any of our relatives. We were told to walk up onto the porch and into the hallway. I was pushed to the window of the waiting room and saw the doctor and his wife giving injections to several women.

"Oh, my God, it's true. We are going to die," I cried. Mrs. Molnar heard me and said the shots were only to make people relax. "Thank God," I sighed.

There was no more room inside the house or on the porch, so the Germans herded us back into the yard. I saw my grandparents coming through the front gate. My two cousins and their mothers followed. Mother wanted to rush over and greet them, but the crowd was too dense. She was blocked in and could only reach out, calling their names. I saw Eta and her family. I attempted to wave. My body was squeezed tightly. Rumors abounded. The people speculated in a hushed tone of voice about what would happen next.

Fear had strangled me, and I was suffocating.

An officer and several soldiers came into the yard, and they ordered us to move close to the wall.

"Now we are going to get shot," a wheezing voice said.

"Line up in rows of five," the officer shouted. The soldiers separated us with their rifles, making sure that the order was promptly obeyed.

Old folks, ill folks and children were slow to snap into place. With their rifles, the soldiers made it clear that there was only one way for us to behave.

Young, pregnant, Mrs. Simon was urged with a bayonet to get into line. She told the soldier she would move as fast as she could and force wasn't necessary.

The soldier hit her on the face, and her nose started to bleed. She stood

firmly, looking at the soldier, and called him a barbarian beast. The soldier must have been stunned at this mild form of resistance, and moved further away from her.

After several more rude attacks, the lineup was complete. The officer shouted, "Forward, march!" and the first row of people stepped through the gate, into the street and the rest followed.

It began to drizzle. Outside, a crowd of curious yokels gaped at us. I saw my gentile friend, Aranka, standing next to a tree. Unlike the others who jeered and booed, she held a handkerchief to her face. Do you really care, Aranka? I wanted to wave to her, but changed my mind.

The rain fell harder by the time we reached Main Street where the crowd was just as thick as at the doctor's house. Some people held umbrellas, while the peasant women, who wore six layers of skirts, pulled up their top skirt to cover their heads. I was amazed how those people knew the direction we were heading since nobody informed *us*.

On the unpaved side streets we trekked in the deep mud and horse droppings. The rain slackened. The wind increased in intensity and swept over our heads. We were uncertain of our direction until we turned onto Wekerle Street. At the corner, by our store, we were made to walk down Railroad Street, where we lived. I expected that we would pass by our house, but as soon as we reached the end of my grandparents' tall brick fence, the soldiers blocked the road leading down the street and "Loss, loss-d" us through the gate of the yard surrounding our synagogue.

"This would be a fine place to die," I heard a woman moan behind me. The soldiers chased us into the synagogue, and we were no longer at the mercy of the inclement weather.

Our ancient synagogue was damp and cold. There was no built-in heating

equipment. The religious services were held in the school building, once the cold season had set in. While entering the passageway, our family struggled to get together, and we succeeded.

We were ordered to move into the pews, and warned not to talk or to sit down. Overhead, the eternal light flickered over the Holy Ark. The electric candelabras were switched on both sides of the pulpit. The glow of the chandeliers illuminated the horrified faces. The late afternoon sun broke through the stained glass windows, and spread over us an ominous light of mixed colors.

“What kind of service are we going to have, Rabbi?” I wondered to myself. Hovering over the congregation were the dusty smell of the pews, the odor of wet clothing ... and fear. Two big machine guns were being set up on the balcony, where the women used to sit. “Oh, God, this is the place where we are going to die,” but maybe not. We were collected and made to believe that we were going to die at the doctor’s house. Why? And what was the purpose of removing us from the center of the village, when they could have brought us straight here? I couldn’t ask anyone. The only answer I could fathom was the Germans marched through the village for the benefit and amusement of the gentile population, to give them something to cheer about. At this point the only thing certain was that we were trapped.

Soldiers stalked up and down the aisles and in between the pews, watching for any sign of disobedience. People standing near the aisles drew away from them as far as they were able.

Cousin Juli stood on the wooden seat, whimpering and hid her face in the fur collar of her mother’s coat. Cousin Lacko held his hands under his armpits. His face was blue and stiff. Grandfather's mustache was dripping.

After awhile an officer with a riding whip in his hand, stood up on the pulpit and spat curses at us. I could see his breath and believed he spewed an obnoxious

venom. He used unfamiliar words. He must have come from a far region of Germany, where phrases had different meanings than here. The Schwabish dialect, which the people of Mor spoke, was different even from the dialect of the village five kilometers away.

Among other things he called us *Schwine hunde*, which made no sense whatsoever. "Pigs and dogs." So what? He should have heard the curses our peasants used on winter days, when their horses balked and refused to pull the loaded wagons uphill on the icy road. Now those were some swear words. Of course, the horse didn't mind the words, it only objected to the whip and the kick to its loins. And I was afraid of the officer's whip. Soon the officer intensified the filth in his monologue.

Grandfather clinched his fist in silence. Father's ear lobes were red. He must have understood everything the officer had said, and he was ashamed to let me hear those dirty words. Yet he was silent. I felt that God was silent too.

Another officer approached the one at the pulpit and whispered something into his ear.

The officer frowned. "You're right, I should have thought of that." It was obvious that the second officer warned him that his speech had no possible effect on the Jews if they couldn't understand German. The first officer asked the rabbi if he could translate what he was saying. The rabbi hid a faint smile, and told him there was no need, as the majority of the people spoke German fluently.

The officer gave up his attempt to pollute the air and began to lecture.

"Jews, we are going to teach you how to live under the great German rule. Give us the names and addresses of all the other Jews, who are not yet here with you so they, too, will learn the regulations. After everyone is informed, you all could go back to your homes." To show his good intentions, he allowed us to sit down, and

talk.

Although we were anxious to go home, nobody was willing to give him the names of the fellow Jews, until old Mr. Stein, famous for his honesty, believed that the German officer was sincere and he gave information about one Jewish family. His act encouraged others to speak up. Even the names of converts were given to the officer. We held our breath in fear that some eager person would tell about Aunt Ella. Fortunately, her name wasn't mentioned.

Eighty-year-old Mrs. Kohen was brought in. She was hard of hearing, and the soldiers dragged her out of her house without an overcoat or a hat. Snowflakes were melting on her shoulders. Her fear-dimmed eyes kept closing and opening. Attorney Spitz and his gentile wife, veterinarian Kennesy, a convert and his wife, and the Barton family were brought in next.

I checked my watch. It was six-thirty. Only two hours before, we were secure in our store. I felt hunger pangs, but didn't tell Mother.

At seven o'clock another officer came in. He scrutinized the crowd and spat on the carpet. The machine guns were removed from the balcony. A sigh of relief rose from the congregants. A moment later a new set of machine guns was put in their place. Father whispered that a different regiment had taken us over.

Two officers counted us, and each of them came up with a different number. Not satisfied with their count, a third officer mocked them and he did the head count, coming up with a third number. He swore.

"Permit me to help you, generals," said a retired math teacher. "There are one hundred ninety-five of us." That made these low ranking officers furious, while the whole congregation snickered. For punishment, we had to stand up again.

One of the officers spoke with a different accent, spicing his vitriolic speech with a variety of new-sounding curses.

Around eight o'clock I told Mother I had to go to the toilet. She didn't know what to tell me. There were many anguished persons with the same problem. The rabbi asked the officer in charge and he ordered a soldier to escort us individually.

I was led out by a pale-faced, scrawny soldier. It was completely dark by then, yet I knew the way to the outhouse.

"Leave the door open," he hollered and aimed a flashlight at me. I couldn't believe he meant it, so I was about to close the door. He shoved his rifle into the door and shouted,

"Damn you, leave it open!"

I pulled down my panties with shaking hands and let my coat fall in front of me, finished in haste and ran out, thinking I would rather wet my panties than repeat this ordeal.

Back at my seat I wondered how the soldiers would feel if someone would watch their female relatives urinate.

Eventually, the soldier was fed up with his task of escorting and watching the people at the outhouse and announced that from now on, they could all do it in their pants.

The purpose of these humiliations was beyond my comprehension. Rabbi Stern designated a small closet that was used to keep the Torah covers and the cloths for the bima table, and those who had to, went in there to relieve themselves.

At nine o'clock another regiment took over. When its commanding officer gave his speech, nobody flinched. I thought when this crisis in our lives would end I would write a lexicon about the various swear words I had heard. Or perhaps the Germans already had printed a manual of that sort.

"Paragraph one, sentence one: Face the Jews, spit and say loudly ..."

The young children became listless. Giza held Juli in her arms. "I want to go home to

my bed,” Juli sobbed. Other children cried because they were frightened, tired, cold and hungry. The rabbi pleaded with the officer in charge to allow the children to lay on the carpet, and he finally received permission.

The spare Torah covers were placed over the children. Juli was afraid to lie alone, and Giza sat beside her, but the soldiers chased her back to her seat. Juli whimpered. “Grandpa, take me home!” With a furious thrust, the soldier kicked her in the belly. Giza rushed out of the pew, only to be forcibly restrained by a Jewish man on the aisle side of the pew.

“What do you want from us, God?” Giza cried.

Ten-thirty. New regiment, new commanding officer, new curses.

Mrs. Spitzer had an asthma attack. The commandant forbade both of the doctors to attend her.

At eleven o’clock Mrs. Simon fainted. Dr. Berren disobeyed the order and fought his way toward her. Before reaching the woman, a peasant rushed in. He told the guard at the door that his infant son was dying, and he wanted Dr. Berren to help him immediately.

“Don’t you have an Aryan doctor?” the officer in charge asked.

“We have one,” cried the peasant, “but I wouldn’t even trust him to take care of my dog.”

Dr. Berren was led out of the synagogue. In the commotion Dr. Molnar attended Mrs. Simon.

Later on Dr. Berren was brought back. The baby had been saved.

The night gnawed at the souls of the congregants. As each commandant had unleashed his whims on us, I focused my attention on the purple velvet ark curtains, where two golden lions were holding up the tablets inscribed with the Ten Commandments. I asked God which one hadn’t I obeyed to receive such

punishment as that night. Trying to find some peace of mind in the early hours of the morning, I searched for a passage in our Sacred Torah.

"I am the Lord, your God, who led you out of Egypt." I recited this sentence over and over again.

"Lead us out from here, God," I prayed.

To divert my attention from being scared, hungry, tired and drowsy, I tried to imagine what could be going on in other people's minds. What was the rabbi thinking? What were children thinking? My mind became foggy. Probably we all were thinking the same thing.

At five o'clock another peasant came in, begging frantically for Dr. Molnar. He was told to seek help elsewhere.

"I can't go elsewhere. My mother is dying. She only wants to see him."

"The hell with your mother," hollered the officer, and had the peasant chased out of the synagogue. The officer ordered the guards not to let any civilians enter again.

At dawn the first rays of the sun shone through the stained glass windows, revealing the gaping machine guns facing us. Tiny dust particles drifted neatly in the beams of our sanctuary. Were they formed from all the sighs we had uttered during the long night?

My legs were stiff. I was ready to collapse, but seeing my aged grandmother standing so bravely I took courage and stood like she did.

"Oh, God, let this night be an atonement for all the wrongs I have committed against you." I prayed in silence. I looked at the babies. What were their sins? Why were they punished?

From then on the word, "Why," kept churning over and over in my mind. While I tried to shake the cold out of my bones, a vision of hot cocoa and buttered

croissant lingered in my head. Suddenly, an officer mounted the pulpit.

"The time has come to die. Which one of you stinking Jews wants to be the first one?" he asked, grinning. I drew closer to Mother. She stood motionless as if she was frozen stiff. People coughed and sighed. No other sound was heard.

The rabbi stepped forward. "Give us a chance to say our morning prayer, then I'll be the first one to die."

Minnie Koss, an old maid with the title of "Miss Big Mouth," jumped up. "What do you mean, who wants to die? No one wants to die. And why should we? We are good, law-abiding Hungarians and have done nothing to you."

The officer sized up Miss Minnie and laughed like Lucifer when he realized how much havoc he was creating. He slapped his knees and roared, "We have no orders to shoot you. I just wanted to see you beg and cringe."

"Ha, ha, ha, did you hear anybody beg?" Minnie said and sat down. A strong sigh of relief passed among the pews.

At noon an officer in charge said that ten persons should go back to their homes and bring enough food for the entire congregation.

Mother was selected from our family to go home and bring some food. I told the officer that I would rather take her place and, surprisingly, he agreed. I had no idea how and where I would get that much food, but I was glad to go home anyway.

Since the moment we left the house, last night, or last year, or a century ago, I thought I would never be allowed to return.

The officer instructed us to synchronize our watches, and warned if anyone dared to be late, he or she would be harshly punished. We shouldn't even think of escaping as for each person failing to return, twenty others will be shot. I ran ahead of the guard so fast, he had to jump over the puddles to keep up with me. The people on the street looked at me as if I were an alien being from another planet. I

stopped at my door, took a deep breath, kissed the *Mezuzah*, turned the handle and opened the door. Marishka and her stepmother, Mrs. Fogas, were standing at the stove.

Marishka ran to me and cried, "God brought you home." We embraced each other. "Are you all right? How is the family?"

My reply was brief. I told her I had to rush to the toilet.

Marishka jumped in front of the door. Stretching out her arms, she tried to block my way.

"Forgive me, this wasn't my fault. Each time a new regiment came by, and they were many, I was locked into my room," Marishka whined.

"What are you talking about?" I said. I pushed her aside, and rushed in. My parents' bedroom door was wide open, but I raced through to the bathroom. I was so glad that tears of joy trickled down my face. I closed the door behind me and laughed.

I still laughed while I washed my hands, and laughed on my way out until I reached my parents' bedroom. Then my laughter turned into a horrible gurgling sound. I faced a destruction of such magnitude which was impossible to imagine in my worst nightmare. The room looked as if a tornado had raced through, smashing, breaking, tossing everything in sight.

Chapter 3

Every piece of furniture was marred, the clothes cabinet's door was bashed in as if it had been attacked with a hatchet. The drawers were turned upside down, and their contents strewn over the floor. One of Father's socks hung from the chandelier, his handkerchiefs covered Mother's dresser. Powder was spread over the tapestry upholstery of the cushioned chair. Pillows had been ripped apart; like dead doves, clumps of white down lay on the carpet. The glass casing of the clock was smashed and parts of the mechanism hung loose. The springs of the mattresses dangled by the bed frames. Even part of the drapery was ripped to pieces. And there was mud, mud, mud, everywhere.

Afraid to look into my bedroom, I took a deep breath and opened the door. The view was just as devastating. The glass of the bookcases was shattered. Seeing the books ripped apart, I felt as if someone had destroyed my friends. My dress cabinet was open. It was totally empty; only my white angora hat huddled in the bottom. I picked up the hat and cuddled it as if it were a real, live bunny rabbit; then I removed the gray hat I was wearing and replaced it with the white one.

Between the broken china and crushed glass, Tibor's letters were scattered and stamped with boot prints. I picked up one letter and read, "Trust in your own strength, my dearest, God is for the weak and for those who need someone else to depend on."

I let the letter fall. "Tibor, I am weak and helpless. I need God now more than

ever. We all do, maybe even you?"

Marishka entered the room, holding my salmon pink satin nightgown on a hanger. "This is all that is left of your entire wardrobe," she said, smoothing the material with a trembling hand.

"If I don't return, you can keep it, as a memento from me," I said.

With the exception of Mr. Kertes's quarters the whole house was ransacked. "How come nobody touched his side?" I asked.

"Varga guarded the door and told the Germans that part belonged to Christians."

"With a little good intention, he could have saved the rest of the house," I said angrily.

"Varga is no good," she cried.

I was about to ask more questions, but the German soldier, who stood in my parents' bedroom, urged me to get going. I saw he was cleaning his muddy boots with an ecru, hand-embroidered dinner napkin.

I yelled at him, "Put that down, you heartless creature."

"Who is heartless? Not me!" he shouted and lifted his rifle. Suddenly, his attention shifted to the painting over my parents' bed. It was my portrait in oil, painted when I was sixteen years old. Yanking it off the wall, he knocked the picture out of the frame. Tossing the frame on the battered nightstand, he rolled up the picture and placed it inside his overcoat.

I was dumbfounded. The soldier stalked out to the kitchen.

"Get me some wine," he screamed and to make sure Marishka understood, he formed a funnel with his hand and pretended to drink.

Marishka turned to me. I asked if there was any wine left in the cellar. She

said she had no chance to look either at the summer kitchen, or the cellar, and went out. While she was gone I told Mrs. Fogas the reason I was allowed to return.

“So help me, Jesus,” she cried, “there is no food in the house. I only found some flour and fat in the bin. We have been eating brown soup.”

I told her to go across the street to Mrs. Mezak’s house and ask her for help. She put on her heavy shawl, bundled her head and left.

Marishka returned with a bottle of wine. The soldier licked his lips, anxious to taste the famous dry wine of our village.

Mrs. Fogas returned with a basket, containing a thermos jug full of hot herbal tea, a bag of apples and a large chunk of black bread.

I wanted to put a knife into the basket, but the soldier forbade it. He said to cut up the bread right there. Marishka sliced the bread and wrapped it, then placed it into the basket, and offered to carry it for me.

“No, no,” the soldier said gruffly, “From now on the Jews have to carry their own burden.” He finished the wine and wiped his mouth with the bottom of his sleeve.

“Let’s go,” he growled. I looked at my wristwatch and told him I still had five minutes. He ignored me.

From the door I told Marishka to gather up my letters and hide them in her room. We hugged each other and I lifted the basket. It was so heavy I could barely drag it, yet I acted as if my arms were strong.

Back at the synagogue the people around me asked what the outside world looked like. I told them I had seen only our house. When my parents pressed me about the house, I avoided their questions. I only said that the soldier rushed me and gave me no permission to eat and I was very hungry.

Mother looked suspiciously at the thermos bottle, the bread and the apples. She said they were not from our house and she asked who gave them to me. I had to admit that our food supply had been stolen by the Nazi soldiers. Her face turned pale. Without making any remark, she divided the bread and the apples. I took one bite of the heavy, sour-tasting dark bread. It was an ordeal to swallow it. Mother begged me to eat more, and just to please her I managed to eat half a slice. We had no cups and sipped the tea from the cover of the thermos bottle. I hated the taste of the herb tea, but now the hot liquid made me feel better.

Aunt Giza found meat in the smokehouse. Since Grandfather was no longer allowed to slaughter kosher meat, he had a formidable task to make a living, especially since Uncle Harry was in the Jewish Forced Labor Corps. He had rented out the smokehouse to the farmers. The meat Giza had packed, was mostly pork.

She had brought in a knife. A soldier saw it and grabbed it out of her hand. She tore the smoked sausage links into little bits, and handed them out. Neither she nor my grandparents ate any despite Rabbi Stern's declaration that those who desired were permitted to eat "*trefe*." [According to Jewish law, one can break the dietary law in order to survive.] Giza gave a piece of sausage to Juli. She ate it. Lacko was also given a piece. He made faces, and waited for his mother to take a bite. Only after Aunt Margit ate, did he eat. I took one bite, gagged, but found no place to spit it out, so I swallowed it. The smoked sausage was making painful noises in my stomach. My parents refused to touch the meat.

Grandmother gave away the ham. The people had to bite the pieces off. That would have been comical, if it hadn't been under such dreadful circumstances.

Shortly after lunch, our neighbor, Mr. Mayer, was brought in. He had been away in Fehervar. He said that in other places, where the general population was

pure Hungarian, the Jews were in less danger, unless they were caught on the streets. In the big cities, where the neighbors didn't know each other, it was harder for the Germans to find the Jewish homes. They had no Schwabish informer to lead them.

We were pleased to hear that at least the rest of our relatives were safe for the present.

Among our people only Mr. Weiss, the jeweler, was missing. We hoped that when he would be brought in, we could finally go home.

Sometime in the afternoon, Mr. Weiss was dragged in by two soldiers. His left eye was closed, he had a deep gash on his forehead, and he was bleeding profusely. His lips were cut, some teeth were missing, and through the gaps of his torn, muddy suit we could see other wounds. The soldiers lifted him to the Torah table, made him raise his arms over his head and face the rest of the congregation. He tried to steady himself on the slanted table, but his knees buckled.

"Take a good look, all of you. This is how we treat any Jew, who tries to hide from us," the officer in charge declared.

Old Mrs. Weiss cried out, "Oh, God!" Raising her arms toward her son, she collapsed and died.

Mr. Weiss pleaded to be allowed to go to her side. A soldier struck him in the belly. Mrs. Weiss's body was left laying on the floor without any cover.

"I can't watch," I told Mother, and wanted to sit down behind her. Unfortunately, this was a standing hour when no one was permitted to sit. I covered my eyes with my hands, his pitiful cry penetrating into my head.

Mr. Weiss panted heavily as if he had been running for many hours.

"I was always good to them, yet nobody was willing to hide me," he mumbled.

Dark-red blood from his bruised knees dripped down his legs and shoes and soaked into the purple and gold velvet of the table cover from where the Sacred Torah used to be read.

We hoped that now the entire Jewish population had been accounted for, we would be lectured and released, but it didn't turn out that way.

A high-ranking, ruddy-faced officer strolled in, and announced that he needed a housekeeper. Understandably, nobody volunteered. He paced down the aisles, examining the crowd, stopping occasionally in front of one woman, then searching further. I could hear the sighs of relief from the women whom he passed. As he approached our row Mother quickly pulled the white angora hat off my head, and replaced it with her dark brown knit hat. Protectively, Father slid in front of me.

When the officer examined the row behind us, Father stepped behind me to give me cover. When the officer went further, he stepped back into his place. A moment later, the officer turned around and pointed at me.

"You, come!" he ordered firmly. Mother grabbed me like she used to when as a baby, I was about to fall out of my crib.

"I'll go, Officer," she pleaded.

"I want her," he replied gruffly.

"Don't worry, Mother, I can take care of myself." I tried to calm her even though I knew that was a stupid thing to say. I couldn't even save a fly. Father put his hands over his chest and sat down. His pained expression reminded me when several years before he had broken his ankle and realized he could not stand up on his own.

I kissed my mother and hugged each member of my family. Everyone said, "God watch over you." When I reached Grandfather he bellowed such a horrible

imprecation over the heads of the Germans, that all the bystanders cringed.

I slid along the row of people, excusing myself, as if I had been sitting in the middle seat of a theater, and instead of drawing away from me, each person stood firmly, trying to block my way. It was a caring, but futile act. It did very little to prevent the officer from taking me away, yet I was grateful for their effort.

I had heard rumors of what the Nazis did to Jewish women. Pretending to myself they were only rumors, I walked slowly, with my head held high. From the door I took a last look at the Holy Ark, and another back at the crowd. I stepped out into the cold, wondering where I would be taken.

The officer walked into the rabbi's house, across from the synagogue. He beckoned me to follow. I wasn't sure if he wanted me to stay inside, until he motioned me to close the door behind myself.

I had been in the rabbi's house often, and always admired his exquisite furniture, the colorful, soft Persian carpeting, the oil paintings, and the many handmade art objects decorating the tables.

Mrs. Stern would surely faint if she could now see her home. The parquet floor and the carpets were covered with mud. The rabbi's study smelled of cheap tobacco, sour wine and wet uniforms. The carved desk was loaded with garbage. In the parlor, empty bottles lay across the Bidermyer sofa. The blue damask, upholstered antique chairs were piled with cigarette butts. At least nothing was broken, or cut up.

First, I was led into the dining room, where the commandant had set up his headquarters. I stood with shaking knees, waiting for instructions. The commandant, a middle-aged man, paid no attention to me. He was too busy with others who had come in from the nearby hamlets and villages to protest. I recognized many

Hungarians who used to be customers at our store. The commandant couldn't understand what they were saying.

"*Sprechen Sie Deutsch?*" he asked me. I nodded. He told me to translate whatever the people had to say. It was a pleasure to relay their grievances. They complained of confiscated horses, emptied wine cellars, pigs and poultry taken, and vegetable bins that were ripped open and emptied of their contents.

The commandant had had enough. He swished the air with his hand as if he were chasing away some pesky flies, and he spat out, hitting a lead crystal ashtray.

"Tell the *Schweindrecks* to clear out, or I'll have them shot."

"Ja, ja," I replied, not without "*Schadenfreude*." (That is, a feeling of satisfaction when someone else, beside we Jews, is being ill-treated.) I translated every word he said, including the "pigs' shit." In response, the villagers shook their heads, and let loose their own juicy, Hungarian curses, surpassing anything the Germans had said so far, only they lost their flavor in translation.

After the people left, the commandant ordered me to the kitchen, crowded with tired, hungry-looking soldiers. They were poking into the drawers of the cupboard, opening boxes, shoving dishes aside, shouting angry words at each other, obviously upset because they couldn't find what they were searching for.

I was anxious to warm up by the stove, and rub my hands together. One of the soldiers was warming his feet at the other side of it.

A young, scrawny soldier sat behind the door. He rose, picked up his rifle and led the others out of the kitchen into the foyer where a sergeant warned that at least one of them should return to the kitchen and guard me. Reluctantly, a corporal did come back to the kitchen, but soon after the sergeant left, he peeked into the corridor and sneaked out. I tried to close the door behind him, but he thought

otherwise. The corporal kicked in the white door, leaving a muddy footprint.

While warming up, I worried about those who were still shivering inside the unheated synagogue and drew away from the stove.

From the doorway, the corporal watched every move I made. He was joined by a freckle-faced, younger soldier, who coaxed him to leave his post and join his friends.

“Stay in here, Jup, and help me guard her,” said the corporal.

“Tell me, Hans, what could she do?” Jup asked.

“She could set the kitchen on fire.”

“Oh, you *Dummkopf*,” Jup laughed. “She would be the first one to burn.

“Perhaps, she could find a hidden gun and shoot me in the back,” Hans continued.

“*Ach du lieber*, I thought you already searched the place,” Jup teased.

I turned away to hide a smile.

“Maybe she could put poison into our food.” Hans pointed at a pot with a bubbling substance. “If you are so brave, you guard her.”

“Not me. I’m engaged to be married.” Hans backed away from the door.

“How about tossing a coin? The loser has to stay,” I said, and burst out laughing.

“Oh, Hans, she understood.” Jup blushed, and they slapped each other on the back, laughing, and raising such a ruckus, that a sergeant ran in to see what was going on. The soldiers jumped to attention and Hans explained what had happened. His face was so stiff while he talked as if he were afraid he’d be punished.

“They didn’t reveal any secrets,” I budded in.

The commandant rushed into the kitchen. Now the three of them stood at

attention.

“I report to you, Herr Commandant,” said the sergeant, “these brave men were so scared of this youngster, that they shit into their trousers.”

“What happened?” the commandant asked.

“This little one understands German,” Jup explained.

“Ja, ja,” the commandant said and grinned, “I should have told you she is our interpreter.” He returned to the dining room.

Hans and Jup left the kitchen and when they returned, they handed me a bag of potatoes and a slab of salt pork, and told me to fry up some of the potatoes.

I was peeling the potatoes when they called me to interpret.

“Tell the officer that his soldiers stole my pigs,” a dark-faced, pudgy peasant turned to me.

Another one cried, “My calves are missing.”

After I relayed these and other similar complaints, the commandant pounded on the table with his fist.

“Damn Hungarian dogs, they have the guts to accuse us of stealing, while we sacrifice our lives to protect them from the hordes of the cursed Russians. Tell them to get the hell out of here.”

I went back to the potatoes and cringed while slicing the salt pork into the kosher frying pan. The soldiers ate the food as fast as I could prepare it. Even though I was hungry, I refrained from eating any.

Within an hour, a new company arrived. I hoped and prayed that the officer in charge would let us go home, but soon it was obvious that the new commandant had no such intentions. He was a bit more humane than his predecessors. He had Mrs. Weiss’s body carried out to the woodshed, and allowed the women, children and

sick people to move up into the school building. Those who remained in the synagogue were permitted to go into the backyard, to use the outhouse.

I remembered when the school building was erected. My father was the board chairman. He constructed a miniature scale model out of some lumber, that was so real and accurate, that he had even made red draw curtains for the culture room's stage. After the building had been dedicated, Father let me keep the model, and I played theater to amuse Lacko.

From the second floor of the school building, my mother could look down to the yard. Seeing me carry the potato peels to the garbage, near the outhouse, she rushed down to embrace me. After hugging and kissing and more hugging, I assured her that I was all right. I asked her to tell Mrs. Stern to watch for me when I would come out again, because I wanted to know if she had any kind of food stashed away, that I would try to bring it to them.

On my next trip Mrs. Stern came down and said she had a tin box of butter biscuits hidden in her bedroom cabinet.

The bedroom was loaded with military luggage. Wearing his muddy boots, a soldier lay on top of the handmade, white silken bedspread. He peeked out from beneath his cap when he heard me moving about.

"Schlafen sie mit mir, Fraulein," he whispered in a sleepy tone.

"I'm not sleepy," I replied nervously.

He called me a stupid child, pulled the cap down over his nose, turned aside and continued his nap.

I proceeded cautiously to the wooden cabinet, expecting to find a large box of biscuits. Instead, behind a stack of neatly folded pillow cases, I discovered a tin box so small I could easily hide it beneath my dress.

Once outside I wondered how Mrs. Stern could divide such a small amount among so many hungry people. I wrapped the box in an old paper bag and carried it out to the garbage dump. Soon Mrs. Stern came down to pick up the tin can.

It was late in the afternoon by the time I had a chance to boil up a batch of potatoes. I took one bite and thought of my starving family, and couldn't swallow any more. Feverishly, I searched the kitchen cabinet for something I could prepare and smuggle out to them. I found a box of linden tree blossoms from which we used to brew tea to cure a persistent cough. I searched some more. Behind a large ceramic bowl, I came upon a wooden cup. Inside was a wad of something, covered with tin foil. I removed the foil and saw paper money of large denominations. After a moment of hesitation, I decided to use some of the money to bribe the guard at the school building and carry in a pail full of tea. I would explain to Mrs. Stern why I needed her money and offer to replace it.

I was excited, but not afraid. I brewed the tea and placed it into the largest bucket I could find. I hung a soup ladle on the side, covered it with a lid and headed toward the school. Halfway I changed my mind, and approached the guard at the synagogue's door. I slipped a ten pengo note into his hand and asked him to allow me to take the tea inside. Somewhat surprised, he wrinkled his brows, and pointed at the door. I ran up the aisle, cautiously, trying not to spill the tea. Everyone did a double-take as if there were a ghost.

When I reached my father, I became appalled by his appearance. In my entire life, I had never seen him looking that awful.

"Oh, my baby," he whispered gently and nudged Grandfather's arm. He was startled as he awoke. Seeing me, he smiled.

"How did you get in?" Father's voice changed. I told him. He angrily said it

was wrong to bribe the soldier on guard. I was stunned. Here, these Nazis were determined to destroy us and he worried about the proper thing to do. Then he scolded me for taking a risk. I only kissed Grandfather and rushed out of the synagogue.

Later on, I cooked more potatoes and looked for someone from my family. When I saw Mother, I followed her to the dump. I told her to send out each member of the family, and be sure nobody would report what I had been doing.

At first, she voiced her concern, then she quickly ate the potato which I gave her. When Aunt Giza came out she told me Mrs. Stern had divided the biscuits among the children. Aunt Margit said, although there were wood and coal in the bins, they were all forbidden to use them as the floor of the entire school building was covered with straw.

It was getting dark. I put on the blackout shades over the windows of the house. I served dinner to the soldiers. Again, I abstained from eating the *trefe* meat. I did manage to cook a few carrots for myself.

"Make me some cocoa, then you can go to sleep," ordered the commandant. Cocoa was such a rarity, that I tried to figure out a way to sneak some to Juli and Lacko. The fire in the kitchen stove was dying out. I had to use the small electric hot plate to prepare the cocoa. I set up the plate on a flat kitchen stool and plugged the cord into the socket. The fragrance of the bubbling cocoa filled the kitchen. My mouth watered and I made up my mind to drink some before serving it. I was looking for a cup, when a ruddy-face, young soldier wobbled in and shut the door. Perhaps, the scent of the cocoa brought him into the kitchen. He ignored the cocoa. He reached for his crotch and started to unbutton the front. I thought he might have missed the toilet that was reserved only for the soldiers, and I was ready to tell him

so.

He stepped closer and closer. His breath reeked of alcohol. Now, fear smelled like alcohol. With one hand he reached out for me, with the other he reached into his pants.

"Ficken, ficken, Fraulein," he mumbled and succeeded in pulling out his erect penis.

"Oh, my God, no, no" I shouted, and looked for a way to escape. I moved toward the door. He stepped in front of me. I drew back. He tried to reach for me. I dashed behind the stool, near the wall. He still advanced. At that moment fear smelled like cocoa. Yes, that was it. I would use the hot liquid to protect myself. Without weighing the consequences I yanked the cord out of the socket and with my knee, I pushed the hot plate toward him. The stool tilted, the dish slid, and the hot cocoa splattered over his pants. He yelped and ran out cursing feverishly.

I was shaking badly, and prayed for God's help. I heard the sergeant shouting in the corridor.

"That *besoffene* Kessler did it again." He came into the kitchen.

"Kessler wanted to drink up the commandant's cocoa, instead he fell onto it," I stuttered.

"Never mind, go to sleep. Someone else will make the cocoa for the commandant."

I headed toward the door, feeling so weak, that I had to hold onto the furniture as I left.

"Where are you going?" the sergeant asked. "The bedroom is the other way."

"I'm going up to the school building," I said in a weak voice.

"Aren't you going to sleep with me?"

"No, no, I want to sleep with my mommie."

The sergeant waved and smiled lightly. "Child," he said.

I whizzed by him and ran all the way to the school building, weeping. I tripped on the first step. The guard at the top aimed the flashlight at me. I saw the snowflakes float across the beam of light. I mastered the rest of the stairs. He opened the door and told me that the lights were not permitted to be turned on inside the building. He also said that I should lay close to the door. Then he left and closed the door.

More than ever, I wanted to be near my mother. I called out her name. I was shushed down. For a moment I thought I heard her call. I felt my way in the dark, and stepped on several sleeping persons who cried out in anger.

"Sorry, sorry," I whined, and unleashed my tears.

A hand reached out and I could recognize the scent of my mother's cologne. She pulled me toward her and kissed my face.

"Why are you crying?" she whispered. "Are you hurt?"

"Thank God, I'm not hurt."

I searched for a spot to sit down, and collapsed on the top of someone's body, which stirred, groaned and moved over.

"Is that you, Evike?" Grandmother asked softly.

I leaned over in the dark and kissed her.

Aunt Giza awakened and she gave me a hug, then poked Aunt Margit on the side. "She is here," Aunt Giza spread the news. Aunt Margit wasn't satisfied with the simple answer that I was unharmed. She pumped me for details of my activities.

Suddenly, the cocoa incident surfaced in my mind.

"Someone, please help me, or I'll get sick right here," I moaned and quickly

put my hand over my mouth. Aunt Margit grabbed my arm, and together we crawled out of the classroom. She asked the guard to let us go downstairs. As we reached the bottom step, I threw up and the falling snow covered up the whole mess.

Aunt Margit took a handkerchief out of her pocket and wiped my face.

“Stop worrying, my dear, even if you are pregnant, Dr. Berren would know what to do.” Last week she would have said, “If you are the ‘other way.’” Now she said “pregnant,” without any hesitation.

“Oh, no, Margit, nothing of the sort has happened to me. Just my stomach acts up from this excitement.

We crawled back to Mother, assuring her I was all right. I clung to her and fell asleep.

Chapter 4

At dawn, someone stepped on my hand, and I awoke with a curse, instead of God's name on my lips. Grandmother must have heard me because she sat up, mumbled something, and pulled bits of straw out of my hair. Aunt Giza stirred beside me. While still prone, she brushed my clothing with her hand. My mother rose onto her elbows and kissed me. People were coughing, sneezing, crying, wheezing and praying as the first rays of the sun broke through the steamed-up windows. The strong stench of body odor settled in my nose. Even though I tried to clear my nose, the odor persisted. My mouth was full of straw.

The door opened. An icy wind blew in, stirring the stale air.

"Get up, lazy people," the blade-sharp voice of a soldier boomed over the crowd.

"Get up for what?" a sleepy voice was heard. The soldier had no answer. He left the classroom, but returned shortly, asking for the cook to come down.

Mother pleaded for someone else to volunteer.

Miss Minnie jumped up. "I'll go. I'll go. I'm so hungry I could devour the kindling wood."

"God bless you, Minnie," Mother said and smiled.

Minnie left the classroom. A few minutes later she was back, with a gloomy expression on her face.

The guard stomped his foot on the floor and shouted, "The Herr Commandant wants the same Fraulein to come down who was there yesterday."

The pregnant Mrs. Simon crawled to me and begged to use my influence with

the commandant in her behalf, so she would be allowed to have some food and a decent place to lie down.

“What makes you think I have any influence?” I asked. Tears filled her eyes instantly, and I promised I would try my best.

Juli awoke and hugged me. Lacko slept undisturbed by the commotion. Aunt Margit wanted to wake him up. I told her he was better off sleeping.

I bade good-bye to my loved ones and like a mouse walking toward the trap, I left the school building.

First, I went to the outhouse and on my way back I saw my grandparents' dog, Zookie, sitting at the gate. A soldier was tossing snowballs at him. Then he opened the gate, and chased the dog out. By the time I reached the kitchen door, Zookie had forced his way back beneath the gate. The soldier raised his rifle and was aiming.

“For heaven's sake, leave that dog alone!” I shouted. “He isn't Jewish.”

The soldier turned around and laughed. I ran into the kitchen. The fire in the stove was already lit. Milk and something that smelled like coffee, were warming up on the stove. Plates, cups, silverware, a dish of butter and a half loaf of white bread were set on the table. A basket of eggs lay on the counter. My first impression of an ideal kitchen in the morning turned to panic when Private Kessler appeared at the door. His pants were spotted with cocoa stains, otherwise he was well and sober.

“Good morning. I brought you milk and eggs and kindled the fire for you,” he said shyly. I was stunned, speechless; only after a second or two was I able to reply, “How nice.”

“Sit down and have some good German coffee,” he said, and reached for the pot.

I obeyed him with awe. He poured the coffee and milk. I took a sip and nearly

choked, but I did swallow it to not offend him.

“Fry yourself some eggs,” he told me on the way out.

“Hey, Kessler, thanks a lot,” I shouted. He saluted me.

Seeing the eggs, I quickly thought to boil them and sneak as many as I could to my relatives when they would be going to the outhouse. I put up a pot of water to boil. I also remembered Mrs. Simon and started to slice the bread, trying to think of a way to reach her, too. The commandant walked in.

“Good morning,” he said. “Are you going to eat up all that bread?”

“No, with your permission, I would like to give a few slices to a pregnant woman.”

“You don’t have my permission. She can take it like the rest of the Jews.”

I gripped the handle of the bread knife tightly. The Nazi’s hatred penetrated into the knife, itself, crawled up into my hand so that I actually felt it in my muscles. It would be so easy to kill him, I thought, and my own hate intensified. He couldn’t hurt us Jews any longer. All I would have to do is lift the knife and plunge it into his chest. My pulse quickened. The handle felt hot. I recalled seeing a neighbor killing a pig. Struggling for its life, the pig ran around the yard, squealing and bleeding. I felt sorry for the pig, but I wouldn’t feel sorry for *this* pig. I raised the knife just high enough for a sigh to slide beneath the blade. Then I lowered my hand and felt ashamed. I was almost like my enemy.

In a cooler tone, I said, “I heard that the Germans have high regard for motherhood.”

“Not for Jewish motherhood,” he said and frowned, shrugging. “Stop playing with that knife before you hurt yourself,” he said.

“Please, have mercy, this woman’s husband is away on the Russian front,” I lied. He was away all right, but not on the Russian front.

A few minutes later Mrs. Simon was allowed to come down. Without asking anyone's permission, I gave her a glass of milk and a slice of bread.

"I hope you won't get into any trouble on my account," she whispered.

I told her about the lie I used. She said she would verify it if any of the Germans would ask.

Mrs. Simon was told to go into the bedroom. A guard was posted at her door. What did they expect her to do? There were bars on the windows. The sunbeams made fancy patterns through the crocheted curtains and rested on her large body. She seemed to be so peaceful. I wished her baby would be born into a better world.

Around eleven o'clock Mrs. Simon complained of some discomfort and asked for the midwife. I informed the commandant that our neighbor, Mrs. Mezak, lived only a few houses away and he sent a soldier for her. When Mrs. Mezak arrived, I tried to have a few words with her, but I had no chance. The chief of the local Hungarian police was shown into the room. He complained, through me, that the German soldiers had stolen all the bicycles belonging to the police department. Having no other vehicles at their disposal the policemen were without transportation.

The commandant told me to inform the police chief to get his hide out of there before he'd make cheese out of it. No one was permitted to accuse the soldiers of the Third Reich with thievery and get away with it.

The Hungarian chief of police cleared out fast, stopping only at the doorway to shake his fist and curse. He used such filthy words that I backed into the office without looking, and bumped into a soldier, who said if I wanted to last through the day, I should watch where I was going. Although I saw no dirt at the spot where my body met his, the soldier brushed off his uniform with his hand.

No sooner did he leave when a group of Schwabish men entered the office. Although they spoke German, I lingered around, listening to their complaints similar

to those I had heard previously. They, too, were dismissed with harsh words. I followed them to the front door.

“You should be happy to help your German brothers,” I said and wished the commandant had heard what the Schwabish men were saying.

It was close to noon by the time I completed the egg smuggling to my family at the school building. I asked Mother if she thought I should give some to Father. She weighed the consequences of Father’s opposition, then said that I should try, but I was unable to carry out that part of the plan. One of my guards stopped me when I was on the way to catch up with Grandfather. Why did I have to run to the outhouse so frequently, he asked. I told him I had a stomach ache from having eaten a green apple.

Later in the afternoon I saw a group of men marching by the window. They were lined up five abreast, and there had been four rows. I saw my father in the second row. He marched as if his shoes were of lead, and each step would lead him closer to a disaster. Yet he held his head up high, shoulders straight, just like that old military picture I always carried in my wallet. Those marching behind him imitated his poise. Those in the last row marched as if they expected a stab in their behinds by the fully armed soldiers bringing up the rear.

“Oh, my God,” I pounded on the window with both fists. “Where are they taking you, Father?”

He looked straight ahead. Ah, that proper person again, maybe he was allowed to face forward only when marching on a mission. I put my forehead on the cold glass. My heart pounded an extra beat out of its normal course. I ran to the door, but the soldier forbade me to leave. I rushed back to the kitchen window, but the men were already out of view.

Red tiles, gray tiles, red tiles, gray tiles, I paced the floor. I want to get out. I

was sweating as I marched on the kitchen floor with my own lead shoes. It was almost an hour and hundreds of tiles later that the group returned. Nineteen walked, one was carried.

I felt like diving through the window, yet I was afraid to look. I gripped the rail of the stove tightly until my hands ached, then I let go. I was drawn to the window, and saw Father looking up. He waved.

“Thank God,” I screamed and rushed out despite the guards’ warning to stay put.

I touched Father’s hand and walked with him until he reached the synagogue’s door. His shoes were muddy, the bottom of his pants were wet. He smiled at me. Even after he was inside the synagogue I stood near the door, waving. I rushed back to the kitchen, hoping, that my punishment for not obeying the guard wouldn’t be too harsh. Luckily, the guard hadn’t noticed me — he was at the school building, talking to another soldier.

Eta’s father, Mr. Roth, reported about the condition of Mr. Szepes who had been carried into the yard. On his way out I grabbed his arm and pulled him into the kitchen. Mr. Roth told me what had happened.

The men were led to the outskirts of the village, given shovels and ordered to dig. When the ditch was about one meter deep the soldiers made them line up at the edge, and raised their rifles.

“Pow, pow, Jews,” one of the soldiers shouted playfully. While the other men stood straight, Mr. Szepes had fainted. Mr. Roth shook his fist. “That idiot Nazi thug never had a real toy in his life, so now he was playing with us.”

“Tell me, Mr. Roth, what pleasure do the Nazis get out of frightening us?” He said there was definitely a malfunction in their brains.

I made him eat a piece of bread before letting him leave the kitchen.

Shortly after that five women, Eta among them, were led out of the yard. I ventured to ask the sergeant what would happen to them. He warned me to mind my business. There was nothing for me to do but to wait. Washing the floor of the entrance hall and corridor was better than sitting and worrying.

Private Kessler saw me with the pail and volunteered to do the job. After he finished he put up a sign on the outside of the door. "Please, wipe your feet."

He said, his regiment was pulling out. After saluting me, he left. The rest of the soldiers also moved out of the building and new ones began to arrive. Some paid attention to the sign over the door and wiped their feet, while others ignored it. I only saw the back of a tall officer, walking right in without wiping his feet.

"Can't you see the sign?" I shouted after him.

He turned and gave me a smile that clashed with his SS uniform.

"You sound just like my mother," he said, and laughed. After wiping his feet he walked into the office. He turned out to be the new commandant. I was embarrassed, and scared.

A few minutes later he came into the kitchen, clicked his heels, saluted and introduced himself. I only caught Erich Von something or other. To me, his name didn't matter much. I was so surprised by his polite manners that I figured either the war was over, or he thought that I was an Aryan.

"What is your name?" he asked gently. I told him.

"*Schone Madchen, Schone name,*" ["Pretty girl, pretty name"] he said and touched my chin with the tip of his finger. I avoided looking into his eyes.

"Haven't we met before?"

"No, we haven't!"

"Too bad. We should have," he said, and walked out.

For the rest of the afternoon, he became my frequent visitor. While his

predecessors had sent in some lower ranking soldiers if they needed anything, Erich always came in himself. He was tall and blond with bright blue eyes, a typical model of what Hitler envisioned as a pure "Aryan." Erich's friendly manners gave me courage to ask if there was some way I could get food for everybody in the school building. I told him I had money if he would only send out a few soldiers to the farmers and buy food. He agreed. Soon everyone had something to eat.

I had just finished translating the grievances of a couple of farmers, when Erich said he wished to see me after we went home.

"Home?" I cried. "When are we going home?"

"Sh... not so loud. I don't want anyone to know that I told you."

I leaned toward him and whispered, "When?"

"Tonight." He smiled, yet I was afraid to trust him. Shortly thereafter he sent for the rabbi who arrived in haste. His face was gaunt, his shoulders drawn in, he seemed as if he had aged ten years since I had last seen him. Erich instructed the rabbi to inform the congregation that they were allowed to go home.

"Thank you," he said and bolted out. I wished I could see the faces of the people after they heard the good news.

Those in the synagogue poured out to the yard. Then the rabbi ran up to the school building. Everyone rushed down and people hugged and kissed each other. Some cried, others smiled, and we were deliriously happy to be together and to be alive. Zookie, the dog, found Grandfather in the crowd and let out a loud howl, then rubbed his nose on Grandfather's boot. My surprised Grandfather patted his faithful dog.

Erich put a box of keys on the front hall table. The people had to line up to pick out their house keys and sign their names. Progress was slow. Many were confused and had difficulty identifying their keys and were ordered to step back to

the end of the line.

Old Mrs. Kohen never had any children. She cried that she had to rush home to nurse her hungry baby. Since Marishka remained at our house, we had no keys to pick up. We expected to be allowed to leave right away, but we had to wait just like the others.

We stood there wondering of the delay until we were made to line up in the yard and they counted us, with the aid of flashlights. Instructions were given, that from now on at seven in the morning and seven at night each Jew had to register at the Catholic School building. If one Jew, for any reason, failed to show up, twenty others would be shot. Between the evening and morning registration there was going to be a curfew, when it was forbidden under penalty to be on the street.

Mrs. Weiss's body was carried out from the woodshed. Her son crawled after her. The soldiers dragged him away from her body. Two of Mr. Weiss's friends carried him home in a folded blanket.

As we were about to leave, Erich called me back to the door, and asked to be introduced to my father. Even in the semi-darkness I could see a question mark in my father's eyes. He probably wondered what potion I used to tame the German brute. Erich politely asked Father's permission to visit us, as if we had any way to forbid him. I had a burning sensation on the top of my head and my scalp tingled as I imagined what the German would do if Father said, "No."

Father took a deep breath and said Erich could come to visit us. Erich asked for our address. Mother tugged on Father's arm as if she wanted to stop him from telling, but Father said it anyhow. Erich saluted Father and told him to get going.

My feet were still in the yard of the synagogue. My heart was already at our front door. I walked slowly out the gate. Once on the street, I ran. Suddenly I halted like a horse whose reins had been pulled. How was I going to prepare my parents

for the condition of their home? Father carried Mrs. Mezak's basket and ran ahead, once in awhile glancing over his shoulder. When he realized he wasn't followed by a soldier, his pace quickened even more. Mother was weak and lagged behind so I slowed down. I wished there were something positive I could say to cushion the blow.

"Mama, our house is in a terrible shape," I said after much deliberation.

"Is it still standing?" she asked calmly as if she were inquiring if the milk had been delivered.

"Standing," I shouted and holding each other's hand, we ran.

Mr. Kertes and his brother, Joseph, waited inside the gate. They hugged and kissed us, and still holding on, they escorted us to the stairs. Marishka stood with both arms raised skyward. In the dim light breaking through between the door and the door post, we could see her face glow with sincere joy.

"God has brought you home," she wept and kissed my mother's hand. They embraced. I hugged and kissed Marishka's wet cheeks.

Father reached for the Mezuzah and disappeared. I surmised he ran to the toilet. We also kissed the Mezuzah, and walked in.

Miss Farkas was waiting for us inside the kitchen. After an emotional welcome she told us that while Mrs. Mezak was at the rabbi's house, the commandant accidentally mentioned something to her about our homecoming. Without going into any details, Miss Farkas assured us that Ella and the family were safe.

Father came back to the kitchen. His face was full of smiles. I knew he hadn't seen the rest of the house. The table was set, and the smell of food made my parents act giddy. Holding hands, they danced around the table. I attempted to join the jubilation, and thought, wait until you walk into your bedroom.

"Dear, dear, folks, may you be blessed," Mother stretched her arms and hugged everyone. After dinner, when all that could be said, was told, my parents wanted to go to their bedroom. There was no way I could stop them.

Marishka had done an unbelievable clean-up job, yet the scars of the vandalism were still very visible.

Father stood in front of his dress cabinet.

"It looks like the veneer was bashed in with an ax," he said sadly, and shook his head.

"It was," Marishka cried.

She explained that one of the soldiers from the second group ordered her to open the cabinets, but since Mother had taken the keys with her, Marishka was forced to bring in an ax. She wrung her hands and cried, that she had no way to stop the barbarian.

Father comforted her and he walked through the bedroom, touching, feeling, suffering. Finally his eyes caught the empty space over their bed.

Until now Mother stood motionless at the door.

"Whoever took that, must have been misled by the oil," she said.

"I think it was her Mona Lisa smile," Father said, and rubbed my hair gently, then continued to examine the damage. His face was drawn, and his lips pursed as he held back his painful emotions. I wished he would be more like Grandfather who would rant with rage and swear.

I was even more surprised at Mother's conduct. She was such a fussy housekeeper. I recalled how often Mother put a feather under the bed to check if Marishka had cleaned beneath it. Now she viewed this destruction with calmness. She walked about as if she were planning the monthly general house cleaning. Did Mother really feel that calm, or was she only acting for our sake? There was a story

about Mother when she was in her early twenties. A benefit show had been planned for the war orphans, and she was invited to act in a play. All she had to do was walk to the middle of the stage and shout, "Olga," but the part was given to someone else. The director said she didn't act convincingly. He should have seen her now. Surely, he would have given her the leading role.

"We have to polish the floor, clean the carpet, mend the drapes," she went on. Oh, Mama, can't you cry with me? Your precious things are gone. Your life's work is torn up and our hopes are shattered. My mind wildly spun these thoughts, but Mother must have felt the pain. She picked up the head of the porcelain ballerina from her dresser and said,

"It could be replaced The important thing is we are alive and we are together in our own home."

All our clothing seemed gone, but Mother said we were lucky that Mrs. Kovacs, the laundress, was ill on that Monday. Now our laundry bins were still full of clothing. She ran out with a lantern to the wash house and came back shortly, smiling. "It's all there, nice and dirty," she raved. We had more good news. Our summer clothing in room eleven was intact.

Mr. Kertes walked in. Mother was concerned about my dowry, that had been stashed away in his room. He assured her that his room hadn't been touched by the Germans.

Mother was ready to rush into his room and see it herself but Mr. Kertes stopped her and said it would be better if I went with him first. We walked through the hallway. He opened his bedroom door for me. I was hit immediately by the strong odor of iodine. There was only a small light burning in the glass case over the sofa bed. I noticed that the bed was open, and saw Tibor laying there as if he were in my dreams.

Mr. Kertes anticipated my movement, and put his arms in front of me. "Take it easy," he whispered, "Tibor is injured."

I pushed his hands aside and in less time than it would take to call out his name, I was already at Tibor's side. I ignored Mr. Kertes's presence and bent over to kiss Tibor's lips. The lips once so firm, felt limp and lifeless. He opened his eyes slightly and raised his arm. I turned to Mr. Kertes. "How did he get here?" I asked.

"Miss Farkas received a letter from him on Tuesday, asking her to let you know that he would be coming."

It was hard for me to grasp what Mr. Kertes was trying to explain. I kneeled down by Tibor's side and held unto his hand. While in this position, my parents walked in. I didn't get up. I could feel their burning look on the back of my neck. I let go of his hand.

Mr. Kertes, again told the story of Tibor, but with more details. On his way to Mor, Tibor was caught in an air raid, near Fehervar's railroad station. The bombs were falling and hundreds of people were hurt or killed. After the raid, while the medics gathered the injured, against a doctor's order, Tibor staggered out to the side tracks of the nearby freight yard, where a train was about to pull out, and climbed aboard.

Mother's face twitched nervously while Mr. Kertes talked. She moved over to Tibor and lay her hand on his forehead.

"How do you feel?" she asked gently.

I could see him forcing a smile before replying.

"I'm glad to be here."

Father approached Tibor too. His face was somber, but not angry. "You certainly took a big chance," he said as if he admired him for his courage. Tibor opened his mouth slightly. Father advised him to save his strength.

"We will take care of you."

Knowing how vehemently they disapproved of our relationship, I was grateful for the way my parents accepted Tibor. Father asked Mr. Kertes whether he had called a doctor. He said he had sent Joseph, shortly after Tibor arrived. Doctor Csonka was the only one available. Joseph was told that it would be several hours before he'd be at the house.

When Dr. Csonka, the gentile doctor, knocked on the door, Father let him in. He alone was allowed in the room during the examination. We sat in the kitchen silently.

Soon Father came in and gave a prescription and money to Joseph and told him to go to the apothecary. I was anxious to know the doctor's report. My parents kept the truth about his condition from me, just like they had when my brother was seriously ill. I was too scared to rebel. Father embraced me with compassion. All he said was that tomorrow he would call Dr. Berren.

"After what he said about Tibor on my birthday?" I asked.

Mother told me Dr. Berren was more professional and more humane than to recall such an event in a time of need.

I was still concerned about Tibor's reaction. "He has no choice," Mother explained, and advised me to let Tibor rest, and then I should do the same.

Chapter 5

Father joined Mother in the hallway. They talked quietly for awhile, then I heard Mother say, "We have to set up the folding cot for Mr. Kertes."

The drawer, that contained my dowry, was opened. Mother removed a sheet and a pillowcase and the cot was set up.

Not wanting to take Mr. Kertes's comfortable bed for the night, Tibor insisted on sleeping on the narrow cot. I thought how unpredictable life was. Tibor was laying on the sheet that was set aside for my husband. How would he react if he knew? I wished I could see what was on his mind.

Marishka carried out the blood-stained sheet Tibor had been laying on. I wanted to return to him so badly, yet I had to restrain myself.

"Take your bath, dear, and go to sleep," Mother said.

I went into the bathroom. I was so drowsy, ready to collapse, and didn't linger in the tub. Marishka returned my pink nightgown and I was ready to sleep. Mother's nightgowns were also stolen. She had to borrow one from Marishka, and she got lost in the oversized garment. Father tried to fit into Mr. Kertes's pajamas. The sleeves and the legs of the pants were too short and he couldn't button up the top. I heard my parents laughing through the door.

When the sounds died down, I slipped out of bed and tiptoed to the door that divided my room from Mr. Kertes's. I put my ear to the door hoping to hear something. My heart was pounding so loudly I feared someone would hear. Tibor asked Mr. Kertes to help him get up and go to the outhouse. I went back to bed and stared at the dark ceiling. Shivering beneath the down quilt, I remembered the prayer Grandmother had taught me when I was only four years old.

"Into Thy hands I commend my spirit," I whispered, and added, "and the spirit of those I love dearly."

In the morning, I touched the bed beneath me, and said,

"I give thanks to you, God, for keeping me alive during the night." I was scared to open my eyes and face the destruction in my room. For a moment I pretended that the horrors of the past days were only a nightmare. My daze was interrupted by a knock on the door.

With a soft voice, like she used to urge me to rise on school days, Mother said, "Hurry up, dear, Father is ready to go."

"Why does he always have to be in such a hurry?" I grumbled. Mother left without replying. I listened at the door for a minute and jumped up. Father, clean shaven, was already pacing the floor. He urged me to have breakfast. I rebelled and refused to eat until they would allow me to see Tibor. Mother calmed me down and said that Tibor was still sleeping. I just had to wait to see him after the registration.

We were the first family to arrive at the school house. Only the Germans were before us. Soon the line behind us became longer and longer. From the entire congregation no one dared to miss the first accounting, yet the number was one short. Mr. Szepes had died during the night.

After everybody had signed in, we were given a lecture by a sergeant, whose face must have been mistaken for a soccer ball during a fierce game, and was kicked in on both sides. His vocabulary was broader than his predecessors'. Now we were called, "God-fucking, lice infested, shitty dog pigs." I closed my eyes in embarrassment. The wind blew into the corridor and the draft swept away his foul words.

Once on the outside, I felt better. I avoided facing my parents, and noticed

Lacko grinning mischievously. He turned to Juli when he noticed I was looking at him. I was curious to know just how much he understood. I recalled when he started to study elementary German, he had difficulty in mastering the simplest words until one day his old teacher told him to place the German grammar book under his pillow at night. In his dream, the words would sneak into his head. Nobody believed in such tricks, but the next morning Aunt Margit was shocked when she heard Lacko speaking German. What would his teacher say now if he knew what kind of German words Lacko was learning?

Father asked Dr. Berren to visit us. He agreed to come to our house after seeing his other patients. We said good-bye to him and rushed out of the school yard.

On our way home, we stopped at my grandparents' house which was divided into two parts. They occupied one side; Harry, Giza and Juli lived on the other. Either place suffered only minor damages. Only the silverware and the food were missing.

We met Aunt Ella and her family, and full of emotion, we fell onto each other's shoulders and cried.

Everyone talked simultaneously. I decided to listen to the conversation between five-year-old Juli and six-year-old Erika.

"I was so scared," Juli told Erika.

"I, too," Erika replied.

"It was like this," Juli wiggled her chubby body.

"I, too," echoed Erika.

"But they kicked me in my tummy," Juli tried to outdo her cousin.

"No, I wasn't kicked, but I was in the dark, and Aunt Mitzi hid me under a basket. She said we were playing hide-and-seek, and I shouldn't make any sound until she came looking for me."

From the fragments of their conversation I gathered that while we were locked up in the synagogue, Uncle Ignatz's sister hid Ella and Erika in the wine cellar at their vineyard. Located far from the village, they were secure within the confines of the mountain.

Then I listened to the adults talk. When Ella heard of our experiences she cried and complained of chest pains. I had no tools to measure her feelings. In my opinion, she had done wrong to forsake Judaism. On the other hand, what is wrong when it comes to saving one's hide? Could I throw away my religion to be safe? Of course, Ella called it love at that time. It was only now that it meant survival too.

Aunt Margit described the condition of her house. A sign, "Military Widow," on their front window, had protected them from intruders. Only the small storage house in the yard was ransacked, and Lacko's bicycle was taken.

Mother told them about Tibor. Grandfather mumbled something beneath his thick, white mustache, and before he had a chance to make his opinion more audible, we left their house.

No sooner did we enter the gate when a German soldier crashed in, demanding gold, silver and cameras. Father said he could come in and see for himself as his comrades had already stripped us of all valuables. The soldier answered with obscenities. Father let out an angry sigh, shook himself and closed the gate.

"*Apukam*," I said, "you could always wash my ears out with soap," I tried to lighten up the grim situation. He turned toward me.

"You understood what they said?" Father's eyes gleamed as if they implied, "Now we are in the same boat." He hugged me tenderly and we strolled up to the house.

In the corridor, I asked to be excused and rushed in to see Tibor. He looked

worse by daylight. His face was very gloomy, his skin opaque. Blue and red circles were under his eyes, and his chest heaved as he struggled to breathe.

"How do you feel today?" I asked.

"With you at my side?" Tibor avoided the direct reply. I was shocked, but concealed my emotions.

"You look like you need a shave," I said. "Would you trust me with a blade?"

He frowned. "Your hand might be steady, but my face wouldn't be." I wasn't sure what he meant. His next question was perfectly clear.

"Did any of the Germans touch you?"

Blood rushed to my face. I turned away from him and my breath was caught in my throat. He took hold of my hand and squeezed it. I was happy he still had strength. He must have been angry to assert this much energy.

"Nobody touched me," I assured him. He sighed and the tension of his grip eased.

I saw Dr. Berren coming up the walkway, and went quietly to the door to wait for him. He asked me who the patient was. I had no intention of telling him and hoped no one else would. If he forgot about Tibor so much the better.

After the examination the doctor talked only to my parents.

"Please, tell me what is wrong with Tibor?" I asked the doctor.

"Why should you be so concerned about Mr. Kertes's cousin?" he said. So somebody misled the doctor. I was glad that the unpleasant episode on my birthday had slipped his mind, yet I was still eager to know the truth. The doctor walked away without giving me an answer. I thought Mr. Kertes would be the next best person to ask. After the doctor left, he rushed by me and said he had to get ready for work. I caught him in the entrance room as he was placing some papers into his briefcase. He told me I could go in and see Tibor.

Tibor was sitting up in bed smoking a cigarette. I figured if he had external injuries, the doctor would have forbidden him to smoke.

"Your father shared his last cigarette with me," he said and smiled.

Mr. Kertes came in to say good-by. He had stayed away from his work as long as he could, and he had to leave. If we needed him, he said, we should send Varga to fetch him.

Ordinarily, the valet was around the house. We hadn't seen him since we came home. Marishka revealed with tears in her eyes that after we left Varga had taken our suitcase, saying, "Those damn Jews won't need anything where they are going." She quoted Varga, adding, she suspected he was ashamed to show his face.

"Sooner or later he has to come to do his job, then you can talk to him."

Father said, "Let it go. After all this is over, it will be time to talk to him. Right now, we already have enough problems."

Mother served Tibor a light lunch. Father shaved him. Tibor said he would like to remain ill for the rest of his life if he could keep his nurses at his side.

We let him rest, and we went out to have our lunch.

Things turned out to be less desperate than we had first thought. The chickens, ducks and geese were still in their winter quarters, that were built into the side of the washhouse and the Germans had missed them. We would have eggs and meat, if we weren't going to be raided again. Part of the vegetable bin was undisturbed too. Although there was food rationing, in the village, where things grew in abundance, we had no fear of starvation.

Mother suggested we lay down and rest. Even though I would have rather stayed and talked with Tibor I obeyed her. I must have dozed off. When I awoke Mother told me that the rabbi was at our house. They had many things missing and

he wondered if I knew about them.

I walked over to the rabbi's house. While waiting to be let in, I re-lived those fearful hours I had spent there, and was sweating when the maid opened the door. The place was already sparkling clean, the odor of the soldiers replaced with the fragrance of dried lavenders.

Mrs. Stern wanted to know which of their dishes were used to prepare *trefe* food for the soldiers. I pointed at the frying pan and the various utensils. Strangely, she didn't inquire about the missing money. Back at home I mentioned this to my father. He said I should go to Miss Farkas and ask her to give me the amount of money I used and take it to the rabbi.

"But, Apuka, I spent the money to buy food for the entire congregation."

"Splendid. One day you can tell your children what a big party you had given."

I went to Miss Farkas's house. She gave me some money, and my books she had borrowed a couple of weeks before. I was extremely pleased about the books.

I took the money to the rabbi. Mrs. Stern was surprised. She had suspected the Nazis had taken it. I was going to ask what were her thoughts about me getting the large amount of food, but decided not to.

On my way out, the rabbi took hold of my arm, and pulled me aside. His eyes were dark, and his face was somber. He reminded me of my school years when he discovered that I hadn't learned my assigned Hebrew lesson.

"Is it true that a *shegets* is staying at your house?" he asked, accenting *shegets*. He put an index finger into the side of his starched, clergy collar and loosened it as if he were choking.

Since my upbringing forbade me to say something impolite to the rabbi, I just wiggled out of his grip and shouted, "Good-by, Mrs. Stern."

During the rest of the day we tried to piece our lives together. I came to the conclusion that only the ceilings in the house were untouched. They were clean as ever and when I wanted to rest my mind, I gazed up at the ceiling. There wasn't much opportunity for resting. I was helping to restore our home, and at the same time I was drawn to Tibor.

At the evening registration Erich approached our lines and handed me a small package and said he would pick it up later that night. People near us whispered to each other, probably trying to guess the contents.

At home I opened the package. It contained several pairs of army socks that were in need of repair. Mother, Marishka and I darned the holes in haste, and when Erich showed up in the early evening, the socks were completely mended.

Expecting that he would take his socks and leave, Marishka stood at the door with the package in her hand. Erich smiled as he came to the door.

"May I come in?" he asked politely as if he were entering a house in Hamburg or Munich. Mother, who stood behind Marishka, told him to enter. He saluted Father the old-fashioned way, by touching the top of his hat. Then he removed his hat and greeted Mother in the manner of a local gentleman.

Mother and I sat on our chairs as if we were sitting on pin cushions. She motioned to Erich to sit down.

Erich's eyes roved over the battered furniture. His face turned pale. He probably knew what had happened and didn't ask any questions. I wished I could tell him who was responsible for the vandalism, however I was afraid. Besides, he was our guest.

He sat down on the sofa.

Father sat beside him. After measuring each other up, they exchanged

personal military adventures with such gusto as if they had belonged to the same army unit. Father told Erich about the dangerous mission he had undertaken during World War I, for which he had received the highest military award in his battalion.

Erich congratulated Father and said he was impressed by his courage. Then he started his own story.

"Can you imagine," Erich said, "once we were cut off from our outfit, we were unable to get our backpacks. I had to wear the same pair of socks for two weeks." He used both hands as he talked.

Father's eyes opened widely and he smiled. I knew he was about to tell his famous story of the German regiment he met during the war. Mother knew it too and we both laughed even before he started. Father gave us a stern look. We stopped laughing and he began his story.

"Once we found a German unit, which had been cut off from the rest of the outfit for three weeks. They had lost hundreds of men and horses, and loads of ammunition and had hardly any food. But when we asked one of the battered privates what was the worst part of their isolation, he said, 'It was terrible. For three weeks, we were out of mustache wax.'"

Erich slapped his knees while laughing, and his laugh was similar to Father's old buddies with whom he had been reminiscing in the past. There was no rancor in his laughter.

Marishka served tea and nut cookies. As Erich bit into a cookie, the nuts on the top fell off. He picked up every bit and munched on them happily.

When Mr. Kertes entered the room, Erich arose and introduced himself. Mr. Kertes, who spoke no German, nodded, while putting his right hand to his waistline as if he were hiding something of great value. Knowing that Mr. Kertes disliked military stories, Father politely changed the subject, and told his anecdotes first in

German, then in Hungarian. I interjected a few words while Father paused. I noticed Mr. Kertes fidgeting at the edge of the chair as if he were ready to jump at the slightest provocation.

Mother talked about music, her favorite subject, but the conversation then snagged.

Erich rose from the sofa. He thanked us for mending his socks and for the refreshments, and left.

I listened to his parting footsteps as he walked down the stairs. "He is somebody's brother," I remarked, "who gets holes in his socks."

Mr. Kertes pulled out a revolver from his shirt waist.

"I would have used it, if he misbehaved.," he exclaimed. His mouth was frothy. Father shook his head without making any comment.

I asked Mr. Kertes whether he'd mind if I went into his room to see Tibor once more before going to sleep.

Mr. Kertes said Tibor was already sleeping, and he was going to join him after doing some paper work.

My mother would surely kill me if she knew, but I had to see Tibor. I turned the key and opened the door slightly. I saw him trying to get hold of a glass of water on the tray, but he couldn't reach it.

I tiptoed into the dimly lit room. Tibor's face expressed a shock of surprise. I put my index finger on my lips and handed him the glass.

His hand shook as he drank a few sips, then thanked me and said, "You shouldn't be in here. It is getting late. You need your rest." He drank some more.

I took the glass away and sat by his side, wishing he would tell me how he really felt. I held unto his hand and waited for him to open up. I was shivering although the fire was still smoldering in the room. The last leaps of the dying flames

glowed through the glass door of the stove and painted his tired face with flecks of red and gold.

“Do you suppose when this madness blows over your family still would be kind to me?” he finally began.

“I think they would,” I replied without any hesitation.

“Your parents are marvelous people. If I could only find a way to protect them too from all these horrors.”

Why did he say, “them too”? Does he have a way to protect me? I wanted to know, but dared not to ask. I looked into his sad eyes and waited for some explanation.

“Let’s pretend that there will be a future for us,” he said.

“What would you do after the war?” I asked.

“Oh, I would go to England, or America, study some more and become a doctor of psychology.”

“That’s nice. Would you go alone?”

“Yes, but I would come back for you, *MY DARLING*,” he said in English. He started to cough. When he stopped he was exhausted and I had to help him to lie down. His breathing seemed to come in spurts. Suddenly, he didn’t breathe at all.

I ran out to the hallway where I saw Mr. Kertes already in his bathrobe.

“Please, help me, Tibor is in trouble!”

He rushed in, looked at Tibor and rushed out.

I leaned toward Tibor and listened to him gasping for air. “Oh, God,” was the only thing I could say.

“Call the doctor,” Mr. Kertes shouted into my parents’ bedroom.

Dr. Berren came so quickly he still wore his pajamas. After examining Tibor he demanded a consultation with Dr. Csonka.

I hated the word, "consultation." The doctors had a consultation shortly before my brother died.

"How bad is he?" I cried.

"Get hold of yourself," Mother said angrily.

"Mother, I care about him. Please let me know."

She walked away. After my parents talked with both doctors Mother said I had to sleep on the couch in their bedroom as Tibor would be sleeping in my bed.

"Why, Mother, why?" I bawled hysterically.

"Because Mr. Kertes is a noisy sleeper and Tibor will need his rest."

If she had ever lied to me in my whole life this had to be the one time. There was nothing I could do about it. I lay down on the sofa and tried to imagine what Tibor felt in my bed.

I must have been exhausted and fell asleep quickly. Suddenly, I felt a light touch on my shoulder. I sat up, and was about to scream when someone held a hand to my mouth. By the dim flicker of a penlight I saw Mr. Kertes standing at my side in his pajamas. He wore no bathrobe. At first, I feared that he had bad news about Tibor. Frantically, I jumped up, not even putting on my house slippers. I followed him into my dark bedroom. A narrow beam of light shone from his room. He pulled me inside and closed the door behind us.

"How about Tibor?" I whispered.

"He is sleeping. Didn't you see him?"

"Then what do you want?" I stood there shaking. He covered me with his bathrobe.

"Two German soldiers are out there. Tibor warned me not to scare your parents so I brought you out here."

I saw the soldiers through the curtains. One of them was at the top of the

stairs, the other one at the open door.

“Ask him what he wants,” Kertes motioned at the soldier.

I didn’t have to ask.

“Get us a bottle of schnapps and two women,” the soldier growled and stepped inside the hallway. He was so close I could smell that he already had too much to drink.

“You’d better leave. We have two German officers inside,” I said firmly and turned on my heels. The soldier joined his comrade, told him something, and they staggered down the stairs. They took turns lighting matches, and urinating, at the corner of the building. Then they wobbled down the path and out the yard.

“What did the soldier want?” Kertes asked.

“You jackass!” I stormed into his room, ready to explode.

“Calm down,” he said.

“For heaven’s sake, why don’t you learn to speak German?” I hissed. I was so furious I could have slammed the door into his face if it were daytime. I threw the bathrobe at him.

“I’m sorry,” he said, and sized me up as if he were measuring me for a dress. “I know this is not the proper moment to say it, but you do look glamorous in this long gown.”

I gave him such an angry look that he blushed and lowered his eyes to my toes.

I flew through my bedroom, into my parents’ bedroom, lay on the sofa, trying not to think. I trembled for hours.

In the morning Father asked Mr. Kertes what had happened during the night. First, he said it was nothing, and that made things even worse. Father insisted on

knowing. He told him. Father was steaming mad. He said it was downright stupid and dangerous to expose me to the whim of a drunken beast.

Mr. Kertes apologized repeatedly, although he didn't implicate Tibor. It was lucky for him that we had been in such a rush to go to register, otherwise Father would have drilled out of him the reason Mr. Kertes hadn't asked him in the first place.

At the registration the younger Mrs. Lantz stood in front of me in the lineup. She shook her head as if she had a nervous disorder and she kept repeating, "No, please, no."

Aunt Giza stood behind me and I heard her telling Aunt Margit that two soldiers violated poor Mrs. Lantz during the night. While one of the soldiers raped her, the other one at gun point, forced her husband, her five-year-old son, Pista, and her in-laws to watch.

Mother listened into their conversation and asked at what time did the atrocity occur. Aunt Giza said, that according to Mr. Lantz, it was about eleven-thirty.

"Oh, my God," Mother cried. She stumbled backwards as if ready to collapse. She whispered something to Aunt Giza. I could hear Mr. Kertes being mentioned and it was easy to surmise the connection. So Mother knew.

I took one look at Mrs. Lantz and I, too, started to twitch.

Erich came through our lines and when he saw me, his face turned stiff. He bent down toward me.

"Why are you shaking your head?" he whispered.

"Am I?"

"Take it easy," he said softly and walked away.

At home Father met Mr. Kertes in the corridor.

"You are supposed to be at your office, why are you still at home?" Father

asked and I feared perhaps Tibor's condition had worsened.

At first he said in a monotone voice that he was looking for a new apartment. When Father made no reply, Mr. Kertes explained that knowing we were in constant danger, he was unable to concentrate on his work while away from home. So, if he lived elsewhere it wouldn't matter to him what would happen to us, I thought.

Father assured him there wasn't much he could do to protect us even if he stayed at home.

"Maybe this could." He pulled out his revolver.

"Think it over before you use that, or haven't you heard what happens to anyone who defies the Nazis?"

He said he heard.

I rushed in to see Tibor. He was sitting in a chair with sagging shoulders and appeared to be exhausted.

"I hope you slept well?" I asked.

"How could I in your bed?"

I took a deep breath.

"Of course, you are too naive to understand these things?" He was trembling.

"And before we go any further, there is something I must explain about my behavior in Budapest," Tibor said in a measured tone of voice.

The only thing that stood out in my mind was when at the railroad station Tibor asked me to be his mistress. I hoped he wouldn't bring it up.

"You must not talk about it," I cried.

"I trust you."

This didn't make any sense.

"I want to apologize for the way I acted at the movie," he said.

"Oh, that," I said, and laughed with a sigh of relief. "You are forgiven."

“But ...”

I put my right index finger over his lips. After a soft kiss, he removed my finger.

“Come with me. I have a friend who can secure false identification papers, and you would be safe in our village.”

“I appreciate your offer, Tibor. Please, understand, I would rather stay with my parents. How do you suppose I would feel, knowing that their lives are in danger while I’m safe?” I kissed him.

Tibor sighed and called me a brave little soldier. Then he said if I changed my mind, he could teach me the symptoms of appendicitis and I could travel with him to Budapest, where his friend, Dr. Celle, would see to my safety.

Shortly after Dr. Csonka arrived. He wrote an official request to the Germans to release some of the gasoline they had confiscated from the local taxi company, and advised that Tibor should leave for the city immediately.

“At least Dr. Csonka was good for something,” Mother said with a slight smile.

Mrs. Mezak came over and helped Tibor prepare for the trip, just as she had when my brother was taken to the hospital. Marishka ran to my grandparents’ house and told them the news about Tibor. Grandmother brought a package to be taken to Budapest to Aunt Irma and her family.

When Tibor was ready to leave, he asked to be left alone with me for a few minutes.

“Last night I had a vision of you flying through the bedroom in a shiny, pink gown, and I wanted you so much. It could have been a dream.”

I ran out to my bedroom, took out the nightgown from my cabinet, slipped it over my dress and returned to Tibor.

“It wasn’t a dream,” he stood up and embraced me. We clung so close to

each other that I could feel his heart beat.

“You must come with me,” he said in a throaty tone.

“I can’t. With God’s help, we will survive and then ...” I wept uncontrollably.

“With God’s help, you will,” Tibor said. This had to be a revelation. He called for God, and I was proud, pleased and elated that it was in connection with me.

“May He be blessed.” I said.

“You must tell your decision to your parents,” he said. “I had asked them before I asked you, and they would have trusted me with your life.”

We kissed. “Be good to them and I wish you life,” he said and kissed me again. I ran back to my room, took off the nightgown and returned to Tibor.

Mother knocked on the door and said that the taxi had arrived. Before Tibor left Dr. Berren wanted to examine him for the last time.

“He will be all right,” the doctor said after the examination.

Suddenly, like in those old-fashioned silent movies, the pace quickened. Tibor kissed Mother’s hand. She embraced him. Father shook his hand, Marishka stood crying, and I embraced him in the presence of everybody. Tibor thanked us for our hospitality and asked to convey the same to Mr. Kertes. Then, with the help of Mrs. Mezak, he walked slowly down to the gate. He turned around, waved and then he was gone. I heard the roaring engine of the taxi and cried.

“What is the matter with you?” Dr. Berren asked.

Mother took it upon herself to answer and said it was none of the doctor’s business.

I ran back to my bedroom and fell onto the spot where Tibor had been lying, and wept until there was a knock on the door. Erich rushed in.

“I heard you had requested a gasoline permit and I was so worried about you. Are you all right?” He sounded like a sincere human being.

Father explained that it was a Christian friend who had been injured during an air raid and he needed the ride to the City Hospital.

"Gott sei dank" (Thank God) Erich said and rushed out of the house. "See you later," he shouted from the bottom of the stairs.

At the registration Eta asked if it was true that Tibor had been staying with us.

"Not anymore," I said and felt the gap widen between us.

On our way home we met a Mrs. Pentek, a gentile tenant of Mrs. Kohen. She told us that it appeared as if Mrs. Kohen had lost her mind. She was calling her non-existent children at all hours, and awakened everybody in the neighborhood.

We arrived home and out of habit, I started on my way to see Tibor. Realizing he was gone, I cried, and drifted back to my room, where I lay and gazed up at the ceiling. Maybe I, too, will go crazy with all this ceiling watching.

At night Erich appeared at our door. His walk was unsteady. He held unto the door post while waiting to be asked in. We knew at once that he was drunk. He wobbled into my parents' bedroom and plopped on the bed. He slept for about an hour. When he awoke he complained about a headache and went into the kitchen for a glass of water. As he was swallowing a pill, a soldier burst into the kitchen, shouting, "Jews, I want a couple of gold watches."

Erich coughed and the soldier immediately noticed. Without even saluting, he ran out, tripped on the stairs, got up and ran away.

"I'm sorry," Erich turned to Father. "Is there anything I could do to make your life safer?"

Father turned to Mother as if he needed her encouragement. I always marveled at the silent communication between them. He said to Erich, "Could you give us any kind of official document which we could show to the intruders?"

“Have a picture of each of you ready and I’ll pick them up tomorrow night. I will see what I can do.” He said, “*Auf wiedersehen*,” and left.

Chapter 6

After the morning registration the rabbi stormed into our house. My parents greeted him cordially, but he just waved aside their politeness, and asked Father bluntly if it was true that a Nazi officer came regularly to visit me.

Father controlled his anger, yet I noticed that he clinched his fists and was near to the explosion point.

"The officer didn't come here on account of Eva, he only was looking for a home away from home."

"A Nazi?" Through habit, Rabbi was tugging on the beard he no longer had. He had cut his beard in order not to appear conspicuous.

"Forgive me, Rabbi, but would you say it is impossible?"

The rabbi shook his head and ran out of our house.

"Maybe we should ask Erich not to come," Mother reasoned.

"I would do no such a thing," Father asserted firmly. "If I made a friend out of a Nazi, it would mean there would be one less among them who hated Jews."

"You should have told that to the rabbi," Mother said, and grinned.

That night Father gave three pictures to Erich. One of himself in his dress uniform, adorned with his medals, the other of Mother sitting on a bench beneath the lilac tree she had named, "The Bride," for it had large, white blossoms. The third one was the annual picture Father took of me beneath the blooming, weeping sour cherry tree.

Erich took the pictures and began to tell us some stories about his own family.

He remarked that he wished we were Germans. That evening, Erich stayed longer than usual. Lingered at the door on his way out, he asked Father to walk with him to the gate. When Father returned, he remarked that Erich acted strangely as if he would be going away.

Mother thought perhaps his unit was moving further into Hungary, toward the Russian front.

Erich didn't show up at the morning lineup. His place had been taken by an officer with the biggest, reddest nose I had ever seen. After I signed my name, he handed me an envelope.

The new commandant started out the morning greeting with a long line of curses. He ended with an ominous order: From now on, before and after registration, we must raise our hands and shout, "Heil Hitler."

I could feel the air thickening around me like before a storm. A voice from the crowd shouted "Haman," our ancient foe, who had similar plans to annihilate the Persian Jews. (During the Purim festival, that commemorates Queen Esther's bravery, we Jews customarily stamp our feet while reading the villain Haman's name.) Altogether, we stamped our feet in protest of the Nazi salute.

"Damn you, cursed curs! Everybody! Out to the yard! On your knees," roared the officer.

While kneeling on the gravel I opened the envelope that Erich's emissary had given me. I saw my mother and father's pictures. I turned the pictures around. "To whom it may concern: Please handle the bearer and his, her family with cautious consideration." It was signed by Erich and carried the official military stamp and insignia. I shook the envelope, but my picture wasn't inside. I handed the envelope to Father. He raised his eyebrows and shrugged. "He, too, is interested in Eva," he said.

Even after the day's humiliating experience my father still believed that he was right about Erich, that he was a humane person after all.

As we approached our house, we noticed the front gate was wide open. A large flat-top truck, loaded with firewood, was pulling out from the yard. Father ripped the envelope out of his pocket, and attempted to halt the truck to show the driver Erich's official note. The soldier, who accompanied the driver, aimed his gun at Father, and they sped away.

Father was so agitated that he finally uttered a thundering curse upon the soldiers and their ancestors. He bolted the gate from the inside, then rushed to the back yard and discovered that our entire supply of firewood had been stolen.

On the following day Tibor's taxi returned from Budapest. The driver said that Tibor was safe in St. Andrew's Hospital. I was relieved knowing he would be under Dr. Celle's care. The same night Mrs. Mezak, our constant supplier of the BBC news, told us that she heard the Jews of Europe were not forgotten by the rest of the Western world. We hoped the news was true.

Each day, after Erich left, new laws or ordinances were forced upon us at registration time. One day we were ordered to give up our telephones. The next day we had to give up Marishka. No Jew was permitted to keep a gentile servant.

Marishka rebelled vociferously. She said she loved us as much as she did her own family and she refused to leave. Father explained that the law was the law, even if unjust; we still had to obey it.

Marishka cried in her room for several hours. When she came out she said no dirty Nazi dog could keep her from visiting us.

Mother warned Marishka that she could get into trouble if she disobeyed the

Nazi order. And so we bade a tearful farewell to our faithful servant, whom we loved for many years as if she had been a member of our family. Grandmother's maid, too, loved Juli so much that she made Aunt Giza promise they would visit her.

The same day Marishka left, a letter arrived from Aunt Irma of Budapest. She had been visiting Tibor at the hospital and wrote that he was on the road to recovery.

Beside the cruel laws, other dangers confronted us daily. The local Nazis gained recognition and they emerged from their dingy caves like furious beasts. They recalled every real or imagined incident that caused them some trouble in the past. And they blamed it all on the Jews.

The brushmaker was one of those aching for vengeance. Several years before, to save his life, Dr. Molnar had to amputate one of the brushmaker's legs. That anti-Semitic drunkard, now with the aid of a Nazi soldier planned the revenge. Feigning illness he called Dr. Molnar. The doctor drove over in his one-horse buggy, ready to help. Inside the brushmaker's house the doctor was seized by two German soldiers, who beat him until he lost consciousness. Then they dragged him out to the gutter and chased away his horse. The horse was smart enough to trot home with the empty buggy.

Suspecting foul play, Mrs. Molnar rushed frantically to the brushmaker's house and found her husband. She sent for Dr. Berren to administer first-aid.

Another avenger was a day laborer who remembered a beating he received from a teacher while in elementary school. Accompanied by a German soldier, he stormed into the former teacher's house and the two thugs beat up the half-blind, old man. He died the same night of his wounds.

In another case, Mr. Markus, a vine exporter, was accosted by a former employee, whom he had dismissed twenty years before on account of thievery. The man seized a hatchet and while a soldier stood by, he beat Mr. Markus on the head.

It took sixty-five stitches to sew up his wound.

Our family trembled in fear. Perhaps someone harbored a grudge against my father. Half the village owed him money. It was said when invitations were to be sent out for a municipal event, the officials used Father's ledger to provide the names.

New ordinance: Jew were allowed to go to the produce market only five minutes before closing, and could buy the leftover items which nobody evidently wanted.

Miss Farkas volunteered to do our shopping. Naturally, Father forbade anything that wasn't within the ordinance. Mother said we would have to dig up the rest of the flower garden to plant vegetables. There was a way to circumvent the law; it didn't mention accepting gift vegetables and Mother reasoned she could take what Mrs. Mezak offered. Mrs. Mezak had a large vegetable garden and even a larger heart.

Father shook his head "no." We must obey the law.

New ordinance: The Jews had to move out of the houses on the main thoroughfare frequently traveled by the German military. Twelve families were moved into the Hebrew School and the Culture Hall buildings. Fortunately, nobody from our family was evicted.

New ordinance: Jewish children in public school had to sit separately from the rest in the rear corner of the classrooms, and by the teacher's provocation, they were physically and emotionally abused. Cousin Lacko came home bleeding every day, yet no matter how much his mother pleaded, he refused to stay at home. He said his father wouldn't have liked to raise a coward. He learned jiu-jitsu and fought back bravely.

New ordinance: Every adult Jewish male had to engage in manual labor. Mr. Kertes gave Father a job shoveling gravel into small rail cars. The place was near

Kertes's office. He kept an eye on Father so Father wouldn't overdo the work. Father rode to work on Emery's former bicycle and developed a nice suntan. Even though every muscle in his body ached, Father's appetite increased and he slept better. But leaving us without a trustworthy man during the day worried him greatly. It turned out that Mr. Kertes had the answer. He wrote a letter to his brother Joseph's friend, Peter, and asked him to come and stay with us during the summer.

Other men were also forced to do jobs they were never accustomed to do. The Germans had dismantled and carried away the machinery from the coal mines. Manual labor was necessary to keep the mines open. Dr. Fisher, the only dentist in the district, was ordered to the coal mines. People with toothaches waited at his office, and when they were informed of the dentist's assignment, they stormed the German headquarters and demanded that he be restored to his professional duties. Their ploy worked; the dentist returned.

The rabbi, too, had to obey the ordinance. He was sent to a nearby village located in the valley where he was forced to shovel top soil into railroad gondolas which were transported to Germany. This dirt was a special kind of soil conducive to growing grapes for which our vicinity had been famous.

New ordinance: Every Jewish store owner had to take inventory in his store. A local police officer gave Father the keys. When he unlocked the door, we faced a sickening pile of rubble.

"They should have just taken what they needed," Father said to one of the police officers. He walked back and forth, touching the service counters, picking up pieces of soiled merchandise, placing them into their original boxes. Occasionally, he gazed up to the ceiling as if he were asking for strength from an unseen power.

I stood behind the smashed glass wall of the cashier's booth and played with the Swiss cuckoo clock, trying to put the bird back into the case. My task was easy

compared to Father's predicament.

After a half-hour of aimless wandering about the store, one of the policemen urged Father to start taking the inventory.

Father found his inventory book beneath a pile of fancy shoelaces. With a trembling hand he put it on his desk and gathered some buttons, beads and combs, but his effort seemed futile. The policemen conversed among themselves and briskly told Father that the job was impossible to carry out. They asked him to cover up the result of vandalism with sheets of wrapping paper. I helped him to tear off sheets of paper from the rolls and we covered the mess. An officer then locked up the store, put the keys into his pocket and told us to go home.

Father took one last look at the front door and collapsed on the sidewalk. The policeman carried him into my grandparents' house. Aunt Giza ran for the doctor; I ran home for Mother.

The doctor gave Father some medication, Mother gave him strength and soon he said he was feeling better. Mother was thirteen years younger than Father, and throughout their married life Father had been her moral support. She would say that Father was such an important person that even God needed his advice on how to run the world. Apparently, now they were changing roles.

"This soon will be over. You are going to build a new store.' She accented, "you." "It will be two stories high with a special shoe department. You could have an automatic cash register."

I marveled at my soft mother, talking about such concrete objects as a cash register, when our lives seemed to be worth less than a *filler*, the smallest Hungarian coin. When I was a child I wanted to grow up to be as brave as Father. Now I decided to be like Mother.

Father resented the change of roles. He focused his eyes on a distant spot on

the wall as if he would be the only one in the room. Folding his arms across his chest, he drifted into a shallow sleep.

In the kitchen, we watched grandmother moving about. There was nothing urgent to do, yet she busied herself continuously. Once she stopped and said, "Things aren't so unbearable as long as we are together."

I thought about this a day later, when I heard the plight of old Mr. Vidor. He had no one to share his burden.

Mr. Vidor was a lonely tailor. His wife had died many years earlier and they were childless. He lived alone in an apartment over his now-closed shop. Finding it difficult to climb the stairs, he left only for the daily registrations. On that morning, Mr. Vidor accidentally dropped his keys into the yard below and waited for someone to pass by and bring them up to him. He spotted his neighbor's eight-year-old daughter, Bozsi, playing nearby and asked her to be kind enough and help him. Bozsi had known Mr. Vidor all her life. She grabbed the keys and took them up to the second floor.

"Come in, child," Mr. Vidor said, "I want to give you something."

While he searched for some small change, Bozsi's mother looked around for her. Not finding Bozsi, she screamed that the old Jew had taken her child. She caused such a commotion that the whole neighborhood gathered. Emotions ran high, and the people threw stones at Mr. Vidor's window. By the time the police arrived the situation had been blown out of proportion. The people were saying that the old Jew had violated a Christian girl.

Mr. Vidor was pulled from his apartment and dragged to the police station. On the way the people spat and threw horse dung at him.

Dr. Csonka examined the little girl. No evidence of sexual assault had been discovered. Mr. Vidor was released. He didn't show up at the registration. He was

found dead, still wearing the coat soiled with horse dung.

Mr. Vidor had been an honest, God-fearing man. Now there was no one to clear his name. No one shouted his innocence as loudly as they had shouted the alleged guilt. I vowed, if peace would ever come, I would force Bozsi's mother to walk through the village streets and bear witness to the truth. At that moment, peace lingered far away.

When I was Juli's age I believed if I hid beneath my down cover I would be safe from any harm. Now I wished there really was a place to hide. There was no safe place, no protective cover for the old or the young among us. Not even Juli was exempt when Grandfather was accused of making soap to sell on the black market.

I remember soap-making as an exciting event in our lives. All of us children in the vicinity would watch with curious fear the way Grandfather would stir the strong-smelling, hot bubbly liquid soap in a big, brass cauldron. He played games with us, chanting fearful-sounding, magical words. As soon as the soap had been ladled into burlap-lined, flat boxes the magic had disappeared.

Juli, too, had watched the soap-making ceremonies since she had been old enough to walk around the yard.

When the accusation of soap-making was brought up, the policemen searched throughout my grandparents' house, the work rooms, the smoke house and even the huge ice den, but no evidence of illegal activities was discovered. But that didn't mean they gave up the search. The authorities believed the Jews had ways to hide the evidence under their skins.

One Friday morning, after mailing a letter to Tibor, I was on my way home from the post office and stopped at my grandparents' house. Grandmother was baking the Sabbath *barches* (holiday bread). Juli stood beside her wearing a little

white baker's apron just like Grandmother's.

Grandmother gave Juli a small piece of dough, and the child proceeded to braid it very cautiously. Grandmother tore off a little piece of her dough, recited the required blessing and tossed the dough into the fire. Grandfather watched the two with pride and pleasure, and when Juli was ready, he opened the door of the stove for her to toss in the tiny dough she had blessed while imitating Grandmother.

"Well done, Juli," Grandfather smiled. Giving Juli a big kiss, he picked her up to wash her hands at the wash basin. Suddenly there was a knock on the door. Before anyone had a chance to say "Enter," two burly policemen walked into the hallway and stopped at the kitchen door. Grandfather put Juli down and stepped to the door. With both arms he held onto the door posts as if to keep any expected harm away from us. He was so strong, he could have knocked down the policemen with one hand.

"We want to talk to little Juli," one of the policemen with a Hitler-style mustache, said firmly. Hearing her daughter's name mentioned, Aunt Giza rushed out from her bedroom.

"What do you want from her?" she cried.

"Don't get roused up, woman, we only want to talk to her," the other officer said, grinning.

Aunt Giza ran to the kitchen and picked up Juli and held her protectively.

"I'm not afraid of them." Juli curled down the corners of her mouth, and wiggled out of Giza's arms onto the floor.

The policemen put their rifles near the door. One of them ordered, "You all go into the kitchen and don't you dare come out." We obeyed.

He removed his black hat that was decorated with rooster tail feathers and tossed it on the table in the hallway.

"Hats don't belong on the table," Juli admonished him like an adult. The officer told her to never mind, yet he removed his hat and placed it on a chair. Juli was about to touch the attractive feathers when she realized her hands were full of dough and she hid them behind her back.

The officer closed the kitchen door.

Aunt Giza moved to the glass wall that divided the kitchen from the hallway and said, "Let's pray."

I had other ideas. I pulled the curtain slightly and peeked out. Aunt Giza came beside me and she watched. My grandparents prayed silently near the kitchen cabinet.

We saw Juli standing on the chair. While one officer stood beside her, the other picked up the rifle and leaned it against the chair.

"Juli, you like to play near your Grandfather, don't you?"

"Yes, but I also like to play with my dolls," she said and fidgeted on the chair.

"What do they want from her?" Aunt Giza wrung her hands. I motioned for her to be silent.

"Last week when your grandpa was making soap, did you take your dolls to watch him?" The interrogation continued. Aunt Giza bit her lips.

"My grandfather didn't make any soap last week," Juli answered firmly.

"Tell the truth. We know he did."

Juli shook her head and a tiny curl fell into her eyes. Aunt Giza tore into her own hair as if she were going mad.

"We know you're lying. A grownup saw him making soap," the officer said, and pointed the bayonet at the dimple on Juli's chubby knee. She tried to back away. There wasn't enough room on the chair, so she twisted herself to left and right. Aunt Giza wept so loudly that Grandfather tried to drag her away from the

curtain, but she was immovable.

"I don't lie. Mommie tells me good girls never lie." Juli pouted and small tears sprouted from the corner of her eyes. Aunt Giza smiled through her tears and I felt as if I had swallowed a buzzing beehive.

"Officer Halas, let me talk to her. I know how to handle children. I have a girl of Juli's age," one of the officers said.

Officer Halas stepped aside.

"You'd better tell us what we want to know or we will spank you," the officer yelled.

Juli shook her head. The officer lifted up Juli's skirt and gave her a whack on her buttock. "Tell us," he screamed.

Without saying a word, Juli wiped her tears with the back of her hand. The officer put her down to the floor. Juli ran toward the kitchen door. Aunt Giza burst out, picked her up and hugged her tightly.

"You got a smart, little girl here," Officer Halas said and they walked out of the house.

"I saw Grandpa make soap," Juli said, "but that was before I got kicked in my tummy." She touched Grandfather's tear-soaked face. I ran all the way home, trying to let the bees fly out of my chest.

There had been a few occasions when it was our turn to be amused. On a bright April day the German army held a big rally on Market Square. Military vehicles were on display, and brass band played. German officers stood behind the recruiting stand, trying desperately to persuade the villagers to volunteer and sign up to fight in German uniform. As the people witnessed German barbarism first-hand they were reluctant to comply. When things began to drag in front of the recruiting

table, the air raid siren wailed. Soon two airplanes appeared and dropped a few bombs.

Cousin Lacko had been an expert in recognizing airplanes by the sound of their engines. He declared with much confidence, that the planes, which were supposed to have been Russian, actually were German.

After the all-clear sirens sounded, the recruiter made a harsh speech about the cruel enemy who was anxious to destroy harmless villages. This enemy should be punished and those who believed in punishment should sign up immediately. Many men did.

Oddly enough, one of the bombs had fallen across from Aunt Ella's house into a sandy square near the statue of St. Joseph. Ella said the saint must have been watching over her family because the bomb was a dud and failed to explode.

Hungarian military detonation experts rushed to dismantle the bomb. They discovered it was made in Germany.

Rumors spread that not only the bombs, but also the planes were German. Cousin Lacko felt jubilant. Those men who had signed up with the German military now stormed the headquarters and demanded that their names be removed from the list of volunteers. The Germans warned if they complained further, they would be dealt with as army deserters.

Lacko remarked he would be glad to study from that kind of history book where episodes such as the bombing incident would be recorded.

"Then it depends on who writes the history," Aunt Margit explained to him.

Father said the victors should write the history books. He had no doubt who they were going to be, though he doubted he would be around to enjoy the victory.

To counterbalance the fizzed-out fake air raid, and to regain the trust of the

Hungarian population, the Nazis raided the Jewish cemetery. One Schwabish farmer allegedly reported that he had heard strange sounds. We were accused of hiding a secret radio relay station for spying purposes. The graves were dug up, tombstones smashed, and the tool shed set afire.

My brother's grave was demolished. The tombstone of my paternal Grandfather Salamon, was cracked in two. Grandfather had been called a *tzadik*, a righteous man. I was only five years old when he died. I was uncertain about the existence of an after-life, but if there was such a thing as heaven, I wondered what kind of conversation Grandfather Salamon would have had with God, for not allowing his bones to rest in peace. He could also have had a word or two about the way God took care of his beloved people.

Once I made myself a rag doll, and protected her until one day a nasty boy threw her into the well, I cried and cried and tried to retrieve my doll and I nearly fell into the water. Is God crying now? Is He trying to get us out of the water? Is there a God? Maybe Tibor was right?

A new regiment arrived and we were pleased to learn that we no longer had to register twice daily, but we were warned that none of us could leave the village without a written permit from the Nazi headquarters. If any Jew escaped, twenty would be shot. We heard this so often that it sounded like a nursery rhyme.

"One had escaped, and twenty had been shot.

Twenty were happy, the one was not."

That same day the Jewish people from the neighboring villages had been brought in so the Nazis wouldn't have to keep guard in every insignificant, little town. Some of the folks were placed in private homes, others were put into the already crowded Hebrew School building. There were so many, that people had to settle down on the stage.

"All I have to do is learn to act," a young woman said.

The Schwartz sisters were brought in, and Mother tried to comfort them in their time of misery.

Rumors were almost as bad as actual ordinances. It was said that all able-bodied, unmarried, Jewish women were going to be shipped to labor camps in Germany. Those, like myself who was affected, were panic-stricken. Even if the marriages were only on paper, there were just three single old men in the village.

Miss Millie wasted no time. She married an old, disabled bachelor, dying of cancer. Their ceremony was held at the side of the groom's sick bed.

Dr. Berren, being an eligible divorced man, boasted that he could have a fine time choosing a young bride.

One day after Father had gone to work, a new ordinance demanded that homeowners dig a foxhole in their yards. Mother turned to Mr. Kertes for some instruction. He said he was already late for work. Joseph's friend, Peter, who studied engineering, would soon arrive and he would show us how to do it.

"Who is Peter?" Mother asked.

"I'm sorry," Mr. Kertes hit his forehead with the palm of his hand. "I forgot to tell you, Peter is coming today. He is going to share room eleven with Joseph."

Peter walked into the yard at ten-thirty in the morning. He was tall with sun-bleached hair and dark blue eyes. He could have been about seventeen years old, and spoke the same dialect Mr. Kertes so desperately was trying to unlearn.

Joseph helped Peter move in. Seeing Mother with a spade in her hand, they tossed their luggage on the patio table, rolled up their sleeves and joined in the digging.

Chapter 7

During the digging we became acquainted with Peter. He worked hard, spoke softly and smiled frequently.

I wondered why his school was over so early. Peter explained that the Germans now occupied the school building. The Jewish teachers had been drafted into the Jewish Forced Labor Corps, and those who were too old, were forced into manual labor.

“So you are here to spend a long vacation at our village?” Mother asked.

“Not exactly,” Peter said, “or haven’t you been told of our plans?”

“Come to think of it, Mr. Kertes did mention he wanted you here to keep us company,” Mother said.

“That’s only half of it. Since his valet left and you no longer have a maid, my brother needs help,” Joseph said. “We are going to assist him here and also at his job. I will be away from six in the morning until noon and Peter will be away from noon until six in the evening.”

Mother said it sounded good.

We worked until twelve o’clock. Mother asked if either of the boys was hungry, or would wait until we were finished. Joseph was in no hurry to eat, but Peter wanted a glass of milk.

Mother told him to go into the pantry and take some milk out of the icebox. A few minutes later Peter returned from the house saying he had no idea what an icebox looked like.

I snickered. Mother shook her head slightly as a sign of disapproval and

described the icebox to Peter. He went back and returned again. His face was pink and he admitted he didn't know how to open it. Joseph came to the aid of his embarrassed friend and explained that in the village where they lived, nobody had heard of an icebox.

Now, even Mother smiled. When Mr. Kertes had spoken of his family he portrayed them as high-class landowners.

I wiped my hands on my apron, went into the pantry and opened up the heavy top lid of the icebox. The milk jug was too far down for me to pull it up.

"Fix this latch and open the side door," I said to Peter and he complied. I placed my left hand on the top ledge and explained how to pull out the milk jug without knocking off a container of chicken fat and a jar of plum jelly.

Obviously, the latch, that held the top, wasn't fastened securely and the lid slammed down on my fingers. I screamed. Blood splattered over the icebox, the floor and me. Bewildered Peter lifted the latch, pulled my hand loose and ran for Mother.

She looked at my wound. In an impish tone unbecoming to a mother whose only child had been injured, she said, "It is God's will. Now you no longer are considered able-bodied."

So it was God's will that I had smashed my fingers. I shook my head and cried.

I dreaded to see Dr. Berren, but I had no choice. He cleaned up my wound and said that I had only one broken finger. He gave me a tetanus shot and told me to return every other day for clean bandages. Then he added, "Too bad, now you don't have to marry me."

I had no energy to snap back at him.

When I returned home, Mother was no longer busy with the foxhole. She was

sitting on the patio with a sewing basket on her lap. While I was gone, the village drummer had announced that every Jew had to wear a bright, yellow star on his or her chest when on the street, or at any public place.

"I'm not going out with a yellow star on my chest," I fumed. I remembered the book, *THE SCARLET LETTER*, and believed any such display meant being shunned, and ridicule to the person involved.

Mother let me cry for awhile, then she asked what did the doctor do? I explained.

"You must go out," Mother said.

"Oh, Mother, I don't want to be branded like cattle." I stomped my feet. She wrinkled her brows and let me sulk for the rest of the day. When Father came home at night, she waited until he washed up and relaxed, before bringing up my accident. His face became distorted as if he were feeling my pain. After he no longer asked for more details, Mother informed him about the yellow star.

Father took it worse than I. He picked up his jacket and from the button hole he ripped out the miniature replica of his medal of bravery and threw it to the floor.

"I'm a human being, I won't be humiliated," he roared.

Mother became so frightened she didn't know whether she should get the doctor, or the rabbi.

In my opinion Father would rather avoid being comforted by the rabbi, after Erich, but Mother made me pin up one of her newly-made stars and told me to fetch the rabbi at once.

The rabbi arrived immediately. He told Father that the sky displayed millions of stars and if God wanted his children to be marked with a star, they shouldn't take it as a mark of shame, but as a sign of God's will.

Right then and there, I decided if I ever got out of this, I would become an

atheist like Tibor.

Father apologized to the rabbi, and asked Mother to pin a star on his work shirt. After the rabbi left, we told Father about the new addition to the household. He accepted Peter with little emotion, saying only "I'm glad he helped you dig a foxhole."

That night, Mrs. Mezak told us about the latest BBC news. The Allies warned that because the Germans were allowed to settle in Hungary, dire consequences would befall the nation.

These "dire consequences" manifested themselves in the form of a serious air raid on the following clear day. After the warning sirens sounded, I told Mother to go down to the shelter without me. No matter how dangerous it might be, I wanted to see what the British airplanes looked like. I was feeling miserable because of my injury and Mother agreed without any argument.

I looked up at the sky. First, small airplanes arrived on the horizon, marking up the sky with fluffy, white trails. Other little planes followed, the humming of their engines buzzing a melodious sound. They passed over our village and headed for more valuable targets.

In the evening, Mrs. Mezak told us what she had heard on the Hungarian radio about the bombing. In the town, about one hundred kilometers east of us, an ammunition factory and a freight yard, loaded with German army vehicles, were destroyed. Human casualties were minimal. On its way back, an American airplane had been shot down near the Austrian border. According to rumors the townspeople captured the airmen. It was said one of them was a Negro and he was lynched.

Father warned we shouldn't believe everything we hear. Cousin Lacko talked about the sound of the engines. He said he had expected British bombers.

The next bombing raid hit Budapest. The telephone and telegraph communications were interrupted, and our family kept an all-night vigil, waiting for some news from our relatives. I was sent to bed, but lay awake because my fingers throbbed with pain. Joseph volunteered to get Dr. Berren. At the gate he met Mrs. Mezak. She told him she had some powerful pain killer and brought me a bottle of dry wine. She took my father's hat and placed it at the foot of my bed, saying, I should drink until I could see *two* hats.

I drank wine occasionally, but never more than a few sips. Now I tried my best. I fell asleep long before I could see two hats.

It rained hard the next morning and Father was unable to go to work. My parents spent the morning at my grandparents' house waiting for some news from Budapest. I was in such agony that I could hardly wait to see the doctor.

As I rode my bicycle, I held only one handlebar; my other hand rested in a sling. I had almost reached Dr. Berren's house when I saw an SS soldier (Schutzstaffel elite guard) coming toward me. I was anxious to pass him by and pedaling vigorously, I hit a puddle and splashed mud on the soldier's boots. He saw the yellow star on my jacket and swore at me. I wanted to ride on, but he grabbed hold of the back fender.

"Wipe me off, Jew," he shouted. I pointed at my bandaged hand.

He repeated his demand and added he would take me behind the covered archway and thrash me good.

In no mood to stick around to see what he had in mind, I let go of the handle bar and ran into the doctor's house where I found many people sitting in the waiting room. I was in such pain that I cried very loudly, and several of the people who knew me, gave up their turn. When the doctor examined my hand, he said he had to

remove my nail.

“Do you have to do it now?” I whined, “I’m already exhausted.” I told him about the bicycle incident.

“I’ll give you an injection. You won’t feel any pain.” While he commenced with the operation I looked at his fine collection of French and Italian paintings. I asked how they escaped the hands of the SS.

He said it was sheer luck. Grinning while he spoke, he told me that several, young female Schwabish tenants occupied the front buildings, and the soldiers never looked behind the first building.

After a short rest I was ready to leave. I peeked out from the waiting room’s window and saw the soldier standing with my bicycle.

“It’s amazing,” the doctor said, looking at the clock, “you must have been here at least two hours.”

“Get rid of him,” I pleaded.

“What shall I tell him?”

“Tell him that I died.”

Dr. Berren stepped out and returned a few minutes later. He said the soldier left with the bicycle.

Afraid to walk on the street, I sneaked behind houses and through gardens until I was safely home.

I collapsed on the patio chair. Mother asked what had happened.

“A German soldier cut off my nail, and Dr. Berren took my bicycle,” I cried. Mother understood.

“This will make you feel better,” she said, and handed me a telegram from Tibor.

I read that all our relatives were well in Budapest.

Then it was Passover, the holiday that always meant a family celebration with the customary *seder*, a service re-telling the Exodus from Egypt. Besides us, my grandparents invited some poor people, a few lonely people and those who otherwise did not usually partake in the seder.

Last year my Uncle Harry had been with us. This year he wasn't given any leave from the labor force to come home. Several of the regular guests were also absent.

Bootleg matzo and kosher meat were successfully smuggled from Budapest. We sat down at the table much earlier than usual, as it was important to finish the service before the curfew. The weather was mild and Grandmother left the windows open. The light breeze stirred the chiffon curtains.

Grandpa read from the *Haggadah*. *"In every generation, each Jew must look upon himself as he, personally, was among those who went forth from Egypt. Not only our fathers alone did the Holy One, blessed be His name, redeem from suffering, but also us and our families."*

As we rejoiced in the miracles of old, a large stone hurtled through the window, hitting the leg of Grandfather's chair. It was a small miracle that he didn't get hurt. We picked up the traditional objects from the Seder table, including the Seder plate and the wine goblet for Elijah, and continued our service in the parlor whose window faced the fenced-in back yard.

On the next day it appeared as if a miracle had occurred. The German occupational forces pulled out of the village. The soldiers were needed for more important tasks than terrorizing a couple of hundred scared Jews.

At first, we believed we could breathe easier. It wasn't so. The local police took over and their brutality surpassed the Nazis. Forced to control themselves while

the Germans were in command, this was their chance to vent their pent-up hostilities against us. New ordinances popped up twice as fast as before. On their first day of control, they decreed that every Jewish house had to be marked on the outside with a bright yellow star.

The story was told among us Jews, "Look at that Jew, he sure is different now," one gentile house said to another. The Jewish house overheard, and replied, "No, I always have been different. Fastened onto my door post, in a precious scroll, It possesses the name of the Lord."

Next we were ordered to give up all the books written by Jewish authors, and by authors whose nations were hostile to the Germans. The books would be collected and destroyed. I had many such books, and the thought of letting them burn made me sick.

"I'm going to hide my books," I told to my mother.

"Even if your father would allow it, half the village has borrowed your books. Everyone knows what kind of books you have," Mother warned me.

I wanted to be smart and outwit the authorities. I was going to smuggle some of my books to Miss Farkas, some to Mrs. Mezak and I thought of sending some to Marishka, when my father caught me.

"Listen, dear, don't be so stubborn, books are made only of paper. They will survive the war in other countries, and return like migrating birds in the spring," Father said. Despite his reasoning, I couldn't bear to send GONE WITH THE WIND to the flames. On Sunday, when Aunt Ella and her family came to visit, I made up my mind to persuade her to take that one book. I wasn't sure if she would agree and so I waited for the right moment to approach her. It appeared that the right moment would never come.

Ella had met Marishka on the street after the morning mass. Marishka looked

sick and had lost lots of weight. She did day labor in the fields. Her hands were sore and her back ached. Her stepmother bickered with her continuously. Marishka had to share one room with her two younger sisters and a brother and, worst of all, she said between tears, she missed us very much.

Listening to this story, I noticed that Mother was wiping her tears and I decided not to add more to her sorrow with my rebellious act. I gave up on rescuing my special book. I remembered when I received this large volume, I was so involved with the tale of Scarlet O'Hara, that I refused to eat until I had finished it. Mother baked my favorite poppy seed *kuglof*, and placed several slices near the book, hoping I would notice.

As I bid a sad farewell to my treasured books, I gazed at the book shelves. I felt miserable that Spring, which Father talked about, seemed only a faraway illusion.

According to the BBC news, the Germans were hiding their ammunition near hospitals, churches, schools and cemeteries. Those places became the targets of the bombers. Two days later Budapest was bombed and Saint Andrew's Hospital was hit. There were only two survivors in the basement. Tibor was one of them.

That same week Grandmother became ill. Nobody told me the nature of her illness but I surmised it was a female problem, requiring surgery. The family had to make a difficult decision to take her to the hospital in Budapest where the bombings had become more frequent. After the decision was made, she needed special permission to leave the village. Ella and Ignatz insisted on accompanying her. The taxi had been hired. We lined up to kiss Grandmother good-by. Grandfather called her, "Darling," a word we never had heard him say before.

"Get well soon, Darling," Juli said, "and be sure to send me a picture postcard

of the zoo.” Then she hid behind her mother. “I’ll pray for you, Grandma,” she said. Lacko stood near the taxi silently. His only expression of emotion was to pound on the hood. Grandmother remained calmest, while the rest of us cried. She said, “God has His mysterious ways of doing things.” She blessed us and was helped into the taxi. We waved to her and then she was gone. We stayed around for awhile, inhaling the fumes and dust of the parting taxi, then walked into the house.

Grandfather staggered in and out of the rooms, talking to himself. Finally, he picked up a bottle of Schnapps, took a long swallow and lay down on Grandmother’s bed. Juli sat beside him on a chair and watched.

Ella and Ignatz returned from Budapest the following day. They assured us that Grandmother was in good hands. Irma had secured false identification papers for her and she was admitted at St. Elizabeth’s Hospital, where she would receive proper care.

Ella met Tibor, who now was recuperating at St. Elizabeth’s Hospital from the injuries and horrors of the bombing. At St. Andrew’s hospital he had been trapped in the basement under a pile of medicine boxes. With his bare hands, he had dug himself loose and crawled into another part of the building, where he was rescued by the firemen.

“Tell Eva, that I believe it was God who protected me,” Ella quoted Tibor’s words.

Other frightening stories surfaced about the lives of Budapest’s Jews. Any Jew caught on the street was shipped immediately to Germany without having a chance to get in touch with his family. A famous doctor was accused of being a spy for the Allies. On his way to the hospital, he noticed that the Nazis followed him, and

he ran into the hospital. Thinking he wanted to hide, the Nazis dragged him into the street and shot him.

Ella had more horror stories to tell, but my stomach could no longer take it. I left the house and played in the yard with Erika and Juli.

A few days later a letter arrived from Tibor. He wrote that he was getting better. He didn't describe the details of his escape. Probably, he wanted to spare me the agony. He had seen my grandmother, and the rest of the family were all right.

There were only a few days of lull in the continuous horror stores that drifted from town to town, until they no longer were events that happened elsewhere. Our policemen were quick to learn from other places. One morning after Father left for work, a policeman came to our door and told Mother, that one member of our family had to appear at the police station and bring in our money, silver and gold. We could retain only one hundred *pengo* and the wedding ring.

Mother explained to the officer we had been robbed so often that there was nothing left for us to give.

He said, in that case, one of us should go to the police station to sign some papers. Mother said she would go as I was below the legal age to sign a document. The policeman said it was all right for me to go. I guessed their action wasn't legal either. Mother wrung her hands and said she was worried about me, but I assured her I wasn't scared.

After the officer left, Mother said, "We don't have to be concerned about the cash. The Jewish bank accounts are frozen. We aren't allowed to make any withdrawals. There couldn't have been much money left over after Father paid for the restoration of the furniture, but how about the silverware of your dowry?"

"Give it to Mrs. Mezak. She will take care of it," I said boldly. I kissed Mother

and left before she would take over Father's lines and lecture me about keeping the laws.

At two o'clock, when all the Jews had gathered in the yard of the police station, the gates were bolted on the inside. An officer I had never seen before, came out. He walked around, sizing up the crowd, then spouted, "My name is Jew Eater." His introduction was followed by a speech that lived up to his name. The words he uttered were filthy. Aunt Giza and Margit stood by my side and apologized that I had to listen to such trash. I assured them that words bounce off me like the water from duck feathers. They smiled weakly.

Officer Jew Eater concluded by spitting at us until he ran out of saliva, and couldn't aim any more. He declared that we should go home and bring back anything we might have accidentally overlooked.

Only a few people left. I saw Mr. Mayer, our neighbor, heading toward the gate and asked him to stop at our house and tell Mother I was in no trouble. He wanted to know if I was absolutely positive there was nothing more we should hand in. I assured him that we had been robbed so often that the only gold we had left was in our teeth.

"Who knows, the day might come when that, too, will be taken from us," Mr. Mayer exclaimed with a deep sigh.

Around four o'clock, when all the people had returned, the gates were bolted again. We were ordered to line up and proceed into the building to sign our names.

I removed my earrings and handed them to Officer Fekete. He was a good customer at our store. Father knew him to be an upright man. Officer Fekete explained to the officer at the table that he would personally vouch for our honesty, because he trusted my father to be a law-abiding citizen. The officer was convinced and told me to read the paper. I began, "I voluntarily agree ..."

"That's enough," he said, and handed me a pen to sign my name. After I signed, Officer Fekete said I could go home. I was walking down the corridor when I saw two police officers carrying bull whips. Soon I heard the snapping of the whips and the screaming of the people. I ran out as quickly as if the floor were on fire.

While I was waiting for Margit and Giza to sign, Officer Jew Eater declared that our time was up. Now that we had sworn in a document that we had given up everything with free will, the officers were going to conduct a thorough house search, and those who lied would be dealt with without mercy. Some people moaned, and I got sick to my stomach.

What if a policeman appeared at our house and told Mother that I had confessed about our hidden valuables, and she thought he meant the silverware, and she would go to Mrs. Mezak and each of us would be punished? I also was petrified to think what would happen if Miss Farkas were questioned about the money still kept for us, and it might be over one hundred pengo, or more. I was terror-stricken while imagining how furious my father was going to be if he found out that we had disobeyed the ordinance. There was nothing for me to do, but to pray.

I leaned against a tree, shaking like a leaf in a windstorm. Officer Fekete told me to go home. As I rushed out with my aunts, we bumped into Father outside, by the gate. Out of breath, he was about to enter. Mother had sent Peter to the public telephone at the post office to call Mr. Kertes who sent word with Joseph to Father, telling him about the events. Father had ridden his bicycle at full speed to the police station.

I assured Father that there was no need for him to go inside, because Officer Fekete already had dismissed me.

At home I pulled Mother aside and asked if there had been a policeman at our house while I was gone. She said there wasn't any, and as far as she knew, none at

the other Jewish houses either. It had been only a threat to frighten those still inside to confess.

I begged Mother not to mention the silverware or the money to Father. Even though they never kept secrets from each other she promised not to tell.

Dr. Berren came by in the evening to bring me some medication. He told me about the people who had been tortured. Policemen put burning cigarettes under the armpits of women to confess where they had hidden their valuables. He didn't reveal any names, only broken ribs, torn-off ears, gashes in bellies, bleeding palms, broken knee caps, and cut-up foot soles. The wealthier the people were, the worse beating they received.

"Every one of my patients attested that the policeman who did the beating, grinned with sadistic satisfaction," the doctor said.

We were grateful that we had been picked bare of our valuables, otherwise my father, one of the richest men in the village, would have been among those bleeding.

At night, when I was washing up before going to bed, I discovered, that I had forgotten to hand in my gold necklace which my parents had given me for my sixteenth birthday. I knew that I must get rid of it, but I didn't know how.

That night I dreamed I was Joan of Arc, and awoke screaming when I felt the flames burning my toes.

In the morning I placed my necklace into a little metal box and without telling anyone, I buried it beneath the roots of the geraniums in one of the flower urns at the top of the stairs.

During those horrible days we enjoyed a few pleasant moments, such as

seeing the blossoms of the fruit trees, some of which were supposed to bear fruit for the first time. Nature was recovering from the winter damage. Our garden was in full bloom. Mother arranged two bouquets of flowers, covered them with moist blotter paper, put them in boxes and mailed one to Grandma, the other to Tibor.

In his next letter, Tibor thanked us for the flowers. He wrote that he was feeling well again and would visit us soon. Grandmother was also recuperating from her operation. That day we were in a hopeful mood.

Mother, her face pink, tied a bright kerchief over her hair, and spent many hours digging in the vegetable garden. She said repeatedly how much she appreciated being able to work in her own yard. Joseph and Peter helped her in the garden and also with the chores. Because they did so without pay, Father approved, since no laws were broken. However, the pleasant atmosphere was only of short duration.

One day two policemen walked into the yard, and said they came to pick up my bicycle. I explained how I had lost mine to a German soldier. They instructed me to bring in Father's bicycle instead on the following morning.

I argued that Father needed the bicycle to ride to work, but to no avail. The officers insisted they were only carrying out an order. Father had been using Emery's fully-equipped, foreign-made bicycle. Mr. Kertes suggested that I hand in his own weather-beaten bicycle, but I explained that Father would never permit that. Besides, everyone in Mor knew what kind of bicycle we owned.

In the morning Father left for work much earlier, and Mr. Kertes persuaded me to allow him to at least to exchange the seats. I let him to that. Unfortunately, he didn't fasten the seat properly and I felt it wobbling as I rode into the police station.

A young officer by the name of Morvay took the bicycle from me and right away noticed the loose seat.

"This doesn't belong here.' He patted the worn leather seat. I told him that it did belong. He wiggled the seat sideways and shook his head.

"I had to lower it because Father has longer legs," I said, hoping he didn't notice how nervous I was.

"You need two hands to adjust a seat," Officer Morvay touched my bandage, and pointed at the bull whip on the wall.

"You wouldn't stoop so low as hitting a girl?" My voice trembled.

"No, I guess not. We just have to call in your father and let him have it, if that's agreeable with you?" He grinned maliciously.

I confessed that Father knew nothing about the changing of the seat. He was such a law-abiding citizen, he wouldn't allow me to break even a minor law.

"We'll forget the whole thing if you go home and bring back the original seat."

I begged the officer not to tell my father about this incident because he would punish me.

"What are you going to give me, if I keep my mouth shut, you little law breaker?" He tilted his head back and laughed loudly.

"There is nothing I can give you," I shook my head and perspiration trickled down my back.

"Well, sooner or later I am bound to collect." His face became serious.

Sooner or later was not now, I figured, and rushed out of the police station. Luckily, I met Mr. Kertes at Wekerle Street. I assured him that I didn't implicate him, and he exchanged the seats. At home I told Mother everything. She reassured me that Morvay was only loud-mouthing and with all the countless things the policemen were involved in, he would surely forget this incident.

That night, I dreamed that I was violated by Officer Morvay, gave birth to twin

boys which he took away on a bicycle, and replaced them with twins made of marzipan.

April 1944 was the worst April in our lives. May started just as badly. An old army officer, whose face appeared as if he always wore tight shoes, took over my bedroom. I had to sleep in the maid's room. Fortunately, Captain Lakatos caused little trouble. He left early in the morning and returned late at night which allowed me to enter my room whenever I wanted. Once, when I needed some stationery from my drawer, I saw a revolver near my envelopes.

This setup was short-lived. The authorities said that our house was still too big for a small Jewish family.

My parents welcomed the Ungers and told them to feel as if our home were theirs.

Mr. and Mrs. Unger moved into our summer kitchen. Their fourteen-year-old son, Mikki, Lacko's only friend, was put up on a cot in room eleven with Joseph and Peter. The Ungers' slim, dark-skinned, exotic-looking daughter, Edit, was given the maid's room and I was sent to sleep on the couch in my parents' bedroom.

Edit had been a close friend of my late brother. After he died, she had married an accountant. Edit was weak from the recent miscarriage she had suffered following the news that her husband was missing on the Russian front. She either sat on the patio and brushed her shiny, long, black hair, or lounged near the peony beds and sang tunes from well-known American movies.

Mikki liked to climb up to the fence post and chase away the lilac thieves who tried to break off boughs of sweet-scented, purple-blue lilacs.

Mrs. Unger, one of the best dressed women in the village, helped Mother with the house chores. She wore many styles of fancy dresses. None, of course, was

appropriate for housework.

Mr. Unger, a former landowner, worked at the railroad yard. When he was at home, he entertained us with witty jokes about Hitler. Mr. Unger was more optimistic than my father, whom he amused by talking about the humorous books he had read. He also shared many folk anecdotes. We were grateful for that because Father's mood kept sinking from day-to-day.

Mr. Unger became friendly with Mrs. Mezak and dared to listen to the BBC news with her. Sometimes the news was encouraging. According to the BBC, the Russians were so close to Hungary that it wouldn't be long before we were going to be liberated. However, no matter how much this news appeared to help our cause, in reality it made our lives worse.

Every Jew had to verify that he wasn't a communist. Father's army discharge papers proved that he had been in the service when the fighting had broken out between the so-called "Reds" and "Whites." Grandfather was less fortunate. After World War I, while walking on the street, he has been shot in the leg during a cross-fire between the Reds and Whites. Now he was unable to prove who shot him. Several men who had witnessed the incident were afraid to testify his behalf. Either they would be accused of aiding a Jew, or if the Russians would come, they would be labeled anti-communist and be punished.

Grandfather was taken to jail. We had double worries. He refused to eat because the food wasn't kosher, and the police forbade us to bring him any other kind of food. He ate only bread, lost weight and grew a beard.

The grandchildren reacted in their own ways. Little Ericka suffered taunts by the Christian children in her neighborhood for having a jailed grandfather. Juli ran away twice with a tiny basket of food she had packed for Grandfather, and Lacko, who loved to read detective novels, was making plans to "spring" Grandfather from

jail.

Every morning we awoke with fear, and if the day ended without another Jewish calamity, we were grateful to God. One day we dared to accept an invitation from Mrs. Mezak. Before sitting down she said she wanted to show us the new furniture she had bought in anticipation of booming business. She boasted that at the last count there were 98 pregnancies. The German soldiers were telling the village women that if they gave birth to a German baby, Hitler, personally, would give them an award.

Naturally, the soldiers had gone far away into other towns, making the same promises to different women. Mrs. Mezak said some women fared worse, but with a wink at Mother she wouldn't say what.

A rumor stirred up the Jewish community. We would be moved to the edge of the village and would live in tents.

Mr. Unger tried to convince us how harmful it was to believe in rumors, but shortly after we caught him burning a stack of papers in the kitchen stove.

I decided that no matter how painful it would be, I would burn Tibor's letters. Sitting by the kitchen stove, I read the letters, then tossed them into the flames.

When Edit saw me, she brought out her box of letters too, those from my brother while he had been away at school. Edit let me read a few. Then she kissed the letters and threw them into the stove, and we both cried.

Mrs. Unger entered the kitchen and noticed our painful ordeal. Before we had a chance to argue, she picked up all our letters, opened the top of the stove and threw them in.

"Why suffer," she reasoned. A moment later the air raid sirens howled.

During the following days there were more and more air raids. Mr. Unger announced he would rather die in bed than bother to get up. We agreed, and when

the air raid sirens sounded, we stayed in bed, turned to our other side and kept on sleeping.

Toward the end of May the Szabos were brought to live with us. Mother told them to make our home theirs.

Mrs. Szabo, a shapely matron, had two children. Lilla, a lovely blond with dark brown eyes, was about Edit's age. She moved in with Edit. The son, seventeen-year-old Marton, was a husky, athletic type. For him we put up a cot in the bathroom. Mrs. Szabo slept in the bed which originally belonged to my Father. Father slept on the couch and I joined Mother in her bed.

Mr. Szabo, an engineer in a bauxite mine, was allowed to keep his job until a replacement was found.

Mr. and Mrs. Szabo had been baptized before their children were born, but had never told their children their parents had been Jewish. Marton brooded all day long, and refused to talk to his mother. Lilla, however, felt triumphant, as she had fallen in love with a Jewish doctor, and wanted to marry him despite her parents' opposition.

Neither Lilla nor Marton had any idea what it was like being Jewish.

When we bedded down on the first night, Mother said to me we should thank God that we still slept in our own house.

On a Sunday morning Father came home with bad news. He had visited Grandfather in jail, and Officer Fekete told him that Grandfather would be released that night, and all the Jews would be taken away Monday morning. Officer Fekete wouldn't reveal just where. At first Mr. Unger tried to tell Father it could not happen, but Father insisted he knew Officer Fekete well enough to trust him.

We and the members of our extended household, reacted as if we had taken a potion that made us dizzy. Like haunted spirits, we drifted aimlessly from room to room, in and about the buildings, up and down the stairs, back and forth in the yard.

Mrs. Unger had gone to the Hebrew School building to see her brother, one among the many persons selected by the police for ruthless beating. Her brother told her he heard that in Fehervar, a famous neurosurgeon had killed his wife and daughter and committed suicide.

We knew things were serious when Mr. Unger suggested we start packing, yet nobody went to room eleven to bring in the suitcases. Those who believed in God's intervention stood around in my parents' bedroom and prayed; the others continued their pacing in the yard as if they were walking around open graves marked with their names.

I saw myself on a dark, fearsome road with millions of other Jews dragging themselves before me. They had been wandering through centuries and countries. Their names passed by like telegraph posts I had seen when I rode on a train. The people wore yellow stars on their chests, their feet were bleeding and they chanted the Jewish prayer, Kaddish, the prayer which glorifies God's name and honors the dead. This was my great heritage and I, too, would tread in the footsteps of my ancestors.

In my daze, I remembered Captain Lakatos's revolver, and decided to ask his permission to take out some stationery from the drawer.

I knocked on the door. Captain Lakatos said, "Enter." He sat by the window with the newspaper over his face. He must have been napping. I told him I needed something from my drawer. He mumbled, "Go ahead," and continued his napping.

I took out a few sheets of paper and an envelope, removed the revolver, put it inside my blouse and left. My knees were shaking as I casually waved good-by.

In my parents' bedroom I asked everybody to leave us alone for a few minutes. When we were alone I pulled the revolver out from my blouse and placed it on the table.

"Father, I believe this is the easiest way out."

He didn't answer. I followed each of Father's movements. He picked up the revolver and checked the barrel.

"There are four bullets inside, we only need three," he said and put the weapon back at the table. I let out a small sigh. He turned to Mother.

"Is that what you want, dear?" he asked somberly. His voice trembled. The veins on his neck were throbbing. With steady hands, Mother picked up the revolver and made it point downward like she used to hold a dead chicken.

"Take this back immediately."

How could she act so calmly, while I felt a storm raging in my whole body.

"Our lives are in God's hands and we have no right to take them against His will. If He wants us to die for the sanctification of His Name, so shall it be, but not by our own hands." Her voice was clear and strong. "If the Almighty allows us to live, and even if we are going to be separated, let's promise we should return to this house."

Father gained strength from her. "Are you certain this is the way you want it?"

"Yes."

"May God help us," he said.

We kissed each other frantically. I returned the revolver. Father opened the door to let the others in. Everybody talked at once. Captain Lakatos, obviously disturbed by the noise, walked out to the garden and continued his napping beneath the walnut tree.

Then, as if by a signal, all of us began to buzz around, like bees after their

hive had been smashed.

Mrs. Unger and Mrs. Szabo rushed into the kitchen. Mikki carried in firewood. Edit and Lilla went into the laundry room. Father and Marton brought in the suitcases. Mother and I started to pack. I looked over the few things I still owned and cherished, but it was painfully difficult to decide what to take. I packed a few books into the suitcase but Mother asked me to take the books out, saying we needed more essential things for sustenance. I said books were essential for me, but Mother replied, "This is no time to argue." She also made me pack a couple of aprons. I picked out one white apron with green piping and one in a sturdy, pale blue print, and continued with the unpleasant task of taking my books out of the suitcase.

From the other room I could hear Edit arguing with her mother. She wanted to pack her entire manicure set. Mrs. Unger told Edit to forget it.

In the middle of this tumult Aunt Ella and her family came to say good-by. I dug up the tin box from beneath the geranium and handed my necklace to Ella. She put it into her purse beside her rosary beads.

What a paradox, I thought. My necklace had a Star of David, hers a tiny cross. Those two could have been the symbols of her life.

Ella suggested I write to Tibor and she would see to it that he got the letter. I raked my mind to find proper words. I had no intention of scaring him, yet I wanted him to know my state of mind. I had to tear up the first sheet of paper because my words were blurry with tears. On the second sheet I wrote that I would remain his "brave soldier." I also recalled our first meeting and asked him to remember me. I signed it "with love," folded the letter and put it into the envelope. My hands were shaking. I sealed the envelope and held it in my hand, hesitating. When Ella took it away from me, I cried.

Mother wanted to pack our huge family photo album she had kept in the air

raid shelter. Ella talked her out of it. She handed Mother one family picture and promised to keep the rest. So Mother wasn't entirely free from doing impractical things either.

Ella stayed for a short while. She also wanted to see Margit and Lacko. We said our tearful farewells to each other, and I walked with them to the gate.

In the meantime, a lot of food had been cooked, but not much was eaten. We took turns in the bathtub. After my bath I climbed into bed and clung onto Mother like a baby.

It was way past midnight when the last light in the house was turned off. I lay in the dark, praying for an air raid with deadly bombing so I wouldn't have to awaken anymore.

I didn't hear the roosters crowing Monday morning, but at five o'clock I heard knocking on the door.

"Get up, get ready, take only as much as you can carry, and bring enough food to last for 48 hours," we heard a crackling voice.

Father was the first to jump out of bed. He ran to the window, pulled the curtain aside, and looked out. "Shema Yisroel, it is the police!" he cried out, then came to our bed and embraced us. Mrs. Szabo sat up in the other bed and called for her children. Lilla and Marton rushed in. They sat by her side, weeping. Everyone awakened, and moved about as if hypnotized.

I got out of bed and drifted in a daze, feeling no pain, only horror. I put on my morning robe and rushed into Captain Lakatos's room. He was still asleep. The news hadn't reached him. I shook him. He sat up in bed, holding the cover over his bony shoulders, shouting, "What's wrong?"

"The police are here to take us away, please come quickly. Ask them where

we are going. You are an officer. Surely they would tell you, come," I prattled.

"So get out. I want to put on my robe."

Lakatos shuffled out, wearing a faded, plaid bathrobe. He turned to one of the police officers, but he was ignored. He walked back to his room and a second later he returned wearing his medal-studded uniform jacket.

Now the policemen saluted him, still refusing to reveal anything about our destination. He shuffled back to his room, grunting, "Sorry, sorry." I thought if he were in our situation, I would say more than just "sorry."

"Maybe Mr. Kertes should ask them," I said. My voice was lost in the confusion. I ran out of my parents' bedroom, raced through the corridor and burst into Mr. Kertes's bedroom. From the shaft of light that shone through the opening in the door, I could see him sleeping with his mouth open. He held onto the corner of his blanket like a young child. The room had a stale odor of unwashed mouth and unwashed wine glasses.

"Mr. Kertes, wake up, they've come to take us away!" I screamed.

"Who is there?" He sat up and turned on the nightlight. When he saw me, he tried to smooth down his disheveled hair and buttoned the top of his pajamas.

I ran to his side. "They came to get us!"

"What's going on? You frightened me."

"I'm more frightened than you are," I cried, and grabbed his blanket. "Please, do something."

"My dear, it is a common knowledge what the Nazis do to young Jewish women. Let me make it easier, so when they do it, you won't suffer too much."

I stopped sobbing. "In Heaven's name, what are you talking about?" I shouted with such force that my hot breath scorched his face and he backed up against the pillow.

"You are a big girl now. You should know that the Nazi soldiers are going to violate you. I'm only concerned about your well being. I promise to be gentle."

"You are crazy!" I yelled and stormed out of his room.

Back at our side of the house, everyone was talking at the same time. As I dressed, I picked up a few sentences.

"Give your letter to Mr. Kertes," Mrs. Szabo said to Lilla.

"Not to him, he is insane," I shouted, but they didn't hear me.

"Mother I broke my shoelace, my shoelace."

"Forty-eight hours?"

"Those are my Sabbath candles."

"Let me get in. I have to run to the toilet."

"Again?"

"Someone should tell Joseph to water the tomato plants."

All this sounded like an untuned orchestra without a conductor.

The suitcases were lined up at the corridor, like horses before a race. Each of us tried to see if we could lift up our own. When Edit attempted to lift her suitcase she was unable to budge it.

"You should throw out a few things," her mother said. Edit opened the suitcase and tossed out her manicure set. Mrs. Unger laughed.

"Please, everybody, eat something," Mother was still the good hostess. She put the dirty dishes into the dishpan and washed them.

"No need for that, lady," said one of the officers in a low tone of voice. She ignored him and washed the dishes, dried them and put them into the cabinet. From the kitchen she went into the bedroom and wanted to make the beds.

"Let's get going, forget about those lousy beds," shouted the same policeman. Mother made the beds in spite of his yelling.

Chapter 8

Our families mingled in the kitchen and stayed away from the door as if nobody wanted to leave the house. The policemen urged us to keep going. Mother wondered why Mr. Kertes wasn't there to bid us farewell when Joseph and Peter from the other building came in. I wasn't going to reveal what had transpired between me and Mr. Kertes, although it would have been interesting to hear how Mother would have interpreted his "good" intentions.

At six o'clock the Ungers and our family kissed the Mezuzah on the door post while the Szabo family looked on. Marton was the first one to step out into the yard.

Mother walked slowly, stopping to touch the leaves of the rose trees. Father moved faster, but waited for her at the gate. I tore a clump of grass from the ground and put it into my blouse. I wanted to feel a part of our garden close to my body. My parents and I roved our eyes over the house and the garden, and each of us must have been gripped by the same pain. Then Father opened the front door and the small caravan walked out into the street. I dragged my suitcase, bit my lip and looked ahead.

We were led into the yard of the synagogue, already crowded with scared, puzzled-faced people. I saw Grandfather sitting on a bench, near the wall. I dropped my suitcases and ran to greet him. His face pallid, his eyes sunken in, he smiled when he saw me. Juli sat by his side, holding his hand. She was half asleep, clutching a doll, and had laid her hand on Grandfather's knees. Aunt Giza, Margit and Lacko stood by. My grandparents' dog, Zookie, leaned on Grandfather's leg.

A police officer appeared at the top of the stairs and delivered one of his

famous smutty speeches. By then I was totally numb as if he was wasn't talking to me but to the tall brick fence. After the slop-slinging was over, the policemen gathered inside the synagogue and shut the door behind them. Mr. Unger still kept his sense of humor. He said the policemen were congregating for *Shaharis*, the morning prayers, and we risked a faint smile.

We waited in fear for the next episode to develop. Suddenly, the door of the synagogue opened. The people were ordered to line up and enter one by one. As the Jews exited from the synagogue, the policemen at the door escorted them to the narrow gate leading into the corridor of the kosher slaughter house, and into the yard of the cantor who used to do the slaughtering.

Then it was our turn to enter the synagogue. Our luggage was examined by a policeman. He removed everything made of metal, such as knives, scissors and watches. Matches, stationery, paper of any kind, pencils, pens and also half of our clothing were taken away.

Father had an old pocket watch which he had inherited from his grandfather. He told the policeman that the watch kept perfect time ever since he was a boy. I could see how hard it was for him to part with the watch. He fumbled the chain and gently placed the watch onto a pile of other watches that marked the time of our desperation.

From the entrance hall we were led into the sanctuary which now contained two, small, makeshift booths covered on the sides with bed sheets. We were told to walk in, disrobe and hand out all our clothing through the opening facing the Holy Ark. I stepped inside and saw Mrs. Mezak sitting on a chair. She wore one rubber glove. Her hand rested in a dish of water that smelled of disinfectant. She motioned for me to undress. As I unfastened my bra, some hidden blades of grass from our garden fell out. Mrs. Mezak's eyes became cloudy. A policeman took away every

one of my garments, shook it out, mumbled something no one could understand, and handed back my clothes.

"What's happening here?" I asked Mrs. Mezak. With her gloveless hand she wiped the tears off her face. "Step closer and spread your legs," she said, loud enough for the policemen to hear. I obeyed and jumped when her wet hand touched my thigh. The cold disinfectant dripped down my leg.

"My dear child, I wouldn't harm you," she whispered. She kissed me. "God be with you." My mouth opened, but she motioned for me to keep silent. I slipped on my clothes quickly, touched her shoulder and exited toward the Ark. I looked up at the Eternal Light. It wasn't burning anymore.

"Oh, God!"

There was one more unexpected ordeal I had to face. A policeman stood at the rear left corner of the synagogue. As I was pushed closer, I recognized Officer Morvay. He was holding a cardboard folder in one of his hands. When the people ahead of me stepped in front of him, he lifted the folder as if he wanted to hide his actions. His face turned red while he ordered me to step in front of him and open my mouth widely. Having no choice, I obeyed. He raised the folder, put his index finger into my mouth, and moved it one side then the other side inspecting my teeth. For a moment I was tempted to bite his finger. It was possible he could have sensed my thought. He withdrew his finger in a hurry, leaned down and kissed me, then whispered, "I warned you that I would collect what you owe me."

I was too much in shock to make any remark. I staggered back to the entrance, picked up my suitcases and followed the policemen through the corridor, where thousands of chickens, geese and ducks had been slaughtered in the past.

As a child, I used to accompany the maids to the slaughterhouse and watch how the *Shoichet*, slashed the jugular vein of the chicken's neck. He threw the dying

birds at a slanted steel board and they thrashed about, in a frenzied death dance, spreading blood over the sides and the walls. Now I could hear their final cry, and wished to cover my ears. Because I was holding my suitcases, I dragged myself away.

I was still shaking when I stepped out into the cantor's yard, where the others, who had already been examined, were waiting.

Mother and Margit told me they had Mrs. Mezak, but Giza and Juli were sent into the other booth. Giza was crying. The unfriendly midwife had stuck her finger into Juli's vagina and anus and scared Juli so much that she broke out in a blistering red rash. Lacko had been unlucky, too, with the same midwife.

Father told Mother when it was Grandfather's turn, he asked the midwife what she intended to do. When she told him, Grandfather warned if she dared to touch him, he would dunk her face into the dish. The midwife called the policemen, and one of them stepped inside. Grandfather gave him such a shove that the whole booth stumbled. He stood there naked, facing the Ark. Defiantly, he was swinging his hands, striking anyone who dared to come near him. Even the policemen backed away. Only Father was able to calm him down, help him get dressed and lead him away.

I asked Aunt Margit if she knew what they wanted from us. She explained that the police wanted to be sure we hadn't hidden any precious stones inside our bodies. I bolted to the outhouse, but threw up before entering.

It took several hours before the entire congregation suffered through this humiliating ordeal.

Early in the afternoon our luggage was loaded on a horse-driven wagon. Mother was allowed to sit up at the side of the driver. We were led out of the yard, and told to march down Railroad Street.

Zookie, the dog, marched with us. Even though the policemen threw rocks at him, Zookie returned to the side of his master.

I held unto my father's arm. As we neared our house I could feel his arm muscles tense up. I covered my face, yet I knew when we passed our house. The muscles in Father's arm relaxed.

Further down the street we saw Miss Farkas peeking out through her curtains. I raised my hand, ready to wave, but Father glanced at me with disapproving eyes. Lacko picked up a pebble in front of his house and put it into his pocket. Aunt Margit turned away from her house, her face showing signs of agony.

Although it was a working day, the street was unusually deserted. Faces and shadows were visible behind the curtains. We walked on the bridge over the shallow creek, where we used to wade and catch baby frogs. We passed by the hills where we used to go sleigh riding. We passed by Poplar Lane, where I received my first kiss at the age of eleven. We passed by the house with the red light, the house people seldom talked about. Then we walked by the house which was everyone's concern, the local Arrow Cross Party Headquarters. We walked by the house of Seppy, the village idiot, by the house of the chimney sweeper, the house of the livery man, who used to drive us to the train in his one hundred-year-old carriage. We passed by the candy store, where I used to buy my favorite Dutch chocolates, which were shaped like little wooden shoes. We walked by my first teacher's house, my friend Aranka's grandparents' house, where we hid at the age of five when we were running away from home. (They had found us behind the horses' stable.) The blacksmith's shop was open, yet no one ventured out from there either. I saw the house of my first nanny. I could still remember the thatched roof sheltering me during a spring rain; I remembered the well, where Emery lost his best cat's eye marble.

We walked past our cemetery. I saw Mother raising her arms toward the battered cemetery walls. She cried, "Good-by my darling son." I saw she was about to fall off the wagon. I bolted out of my line and shouted at the driver, "Stop, stop!!"

A policeman thought that I wanted to escape. He grabbed me and dragged me back to the lines. The driver pulled Mother up and she sat, her shoulders sagging and her head hanging, and her body bouncing with each turn of the wheels.

We reached the high place of the road where we could see the entire cemetery. The tombstones were scattered and the graves dug up. Father cried, "Look, my father, what's happening to us? My dear Emery, we will see you soon." Father tumbled and fell down by the roadside. Mr. Unger helped him up, telling Father to get hold of himself. He pointed at the fields, near the cemetery, where peasants were working, and he advised us to keep our heads up as if we were the ones walking out on them.

The crowd wailed in the background. The nearby vineyards and hills echoed our cries. I imagined the hills were saying, "Jew, Jew on the road, thrown out of town like a dead toad."

Usually, it took a half-hour to reach the railroad station. Today, it seemed like a lifetime. As we approached the station, we couldn't see any passenger cars, only a line of boxcars to ship cattle.

The station was usually crowded with people waiting for the arrival and departure of the trains. Today, not even the village idiot was there, he who had the habit of standing by the gate and waving to the people.

I recalled the pleasant memories when I took a trip to the city, or to the summer resort by Lake Balaton, or headed for some family celebration. How joyous those travels had been.

The police officers urged us to get on the tracks and climb into the boxcars.

There were no stepladders and they prodded us physically to embark. The older people had to be pushed and pulled up into the boxcars that smelled as if their former passengers were four-legged ones. The floor reeked with the soiled straw and cow dung. The cry of the entrapped Jews filled the air.

Once inside we saw two pails standing at one corner. One was empty, the other contained water. Below the roof were two, small windows with steel bars. With sixty of us, and all the luggage, there was hardly any space to sit.

I felt the shock as the engine hitched up. When the doors slammed and I heard the metal latches clink into place, I felt the horror of being trapped.

As the train pulled out and picked up speed, we could hear a dog barking. I climbed up to the window and as the train was making the turn in the bend, I could see Zookie racing by. Then we heard an eerie howl, and we knew the dog had been crushed by the train.

"Zookie loved us so much, he committed suicide," Lacko said, and he began to cry. As the train moved faster, the pail of water spilled out, drenching those who sat near.

The train rolled on. Our rabbi got up and urinated into the empty pail.

I climbed up to the window and looked out. I saw the meadows, and the green hills of my childhood, and when I no longer could see the steeple of the Roman Catholic Church, I sat down and recalled the Hungarian National Hymn.

"Fate of old had rent us sore, may it now bring healing. Bygone sins are all atoned, even the future sealing."

BOOK THREE

Chapter 1

After about an hour of traveling (I no longer had my wristwatch to know for sure), the train slowed down and stopped with a jerk. The contents of the loaded toilet pail sloshed around, drenching those people crouching nearby. They cursed and cried, then got up and tried to wipe off the stinking mess with their handkerchiefs.

I pulled myself up to the window and recognized the outskirts of Fehervar. I had been familiar with many sights of the city. Now I could not remember ever having seen this desolate surrounding of the freight yard. This might have been where Tibor had climbed the freight train to Mor. How drastically our lives had changed since.

Next to ours, a line of German boxcars loaded with squealing pigs pulled up.

“Grandpa, do the pigs know where they are going?” Juli asked.

Someone near the door replied, “No, they don’t and neither do we.”

The policemen unlatched the door and commanded us to disembark. I saw red poppies and blue cornflowers nearby. It felt good to stretch my limbs. A group of policemen from our village assisted with the unloading, and told us from now on we were on our own, meaning, we had to carry our own luggage. They pointed at a narrow road leading into the weed-infested landscape.

Even though my hand wasn’t completely healed, I helped Mother lift off her suitcases, then I picked up my suitcases. They were much heavier than I expected.

Aunt Giza suggested I discard some of my things, but I couldn’t make myself do it. Other people were more sensible. They threw out many clothing items and cooking

utensils, and the road became littered on both sides.

I picked up a thick leather belt with a huge buckle and attached it to the handles of my suitcases and pulled. The rough road tore bits off the canvas covers which Mother had made for the leather suitcases. Looking at the suitcases, she said that she hoped the trip would soon be over.

The roadside was deserted; there weren't any buildings nearby. I attempted to recall the vicinity, but I had no way of knowing about our destination.

A flock of birds rose from the dusty bushes. Perhaps they were frightened by the groaning of our miserable caravan. Grandfather stepped out of the line and rested on his suitcase. Juli put down her little bag and tried to sit on it. She fell backwards and cried. Grandfather cried too. He used to be as strong as an ox. Now he sat helplessly, wiping the tears from his weary eyes.

Father carried his load, his head hanging low; he wiped his forehead and turned occasionally toward Mother and me.

"Sorry, sorry," he said, sullenly.

"Sorry for what?" Mother acted bravely. She seldom carried anything heavier than a small shopping basket, now she bore her load admirably. She joked that she had found some muscles she had never used before.

As we staggered along, the dust mixed with our sweat, and drew dirt lines on our skins. After dragging ourselves for awhile, we could see from a distance a tall fence. When we moved closer, we noticed the gate with a large, yellow star painted on it. Two machine guns at the gate, gaped at us like hungry, Jew-eating lions.

"Folks, we're nearing home." Mr. Unger was still not defeated.

A voice inside of me cried me, "I don't want to go through the gate," but I was pushed through anyway. I found myself in the yard of a dilapidated brick factory.

Kilns were lined up in the yard like large, elongated, mole tunnels. They looked

like large, brown loaves of bread on the table of a hungry giant. From their archways, foul-smelling odors spewed into our faces. We saw open sheds piled high with bricks, and empty thatch-roofed stalls in the center of the yard. The policemen gathered at a small building, near the rear wall.

The flow of the people continued until everyone from our village was herded inside. The policemen locked the gate.

We were divided into groups of one-hundred. Our group was sent inside one of the kilns. We had to bend down to avoid bumping our heads on the low archway and felt our way by the dim, small light bulbs that hung from the ceiling. The damp, hard earth smelled of mildew. Straw had been piled up in corner of the kiln and a policeman told us to gather some for ourselves. Mice scooted out as we lifted our clump of straw. I used to be scared of mice. Now I was no longer afraid of mice, only of men in uniforms.

I grabbed my portion of straw and because my fingernail wasn't fully grown, the straw bits pierced the fresh flesh and made it bleed. I paid no attention.

There wasn't enough straw for everybody. Bickering raged over a handful of musty straw. Mr. Geller, a former wealthy landowner, and chairman of many charitable events, was tearing the straw out of the hand of five-year-old Pista Lantz. Realizing the awkward position he was in, Mr. Geller released his hold. The amount of straw my family gathered, barely was enough for a bird's nest. With our backs to the curving wall, we settled down. It was a difficult posture to maintain and we had to bend our heads while sitting.

----- The Ungers sat across, facing us. Mr. Unger moved about like a hen making room for her eggs, and made clucking sounds.

"Not now, Poppa," Edit cried.

We watched quietly while the battle for the straw continued at other places. I sat

numbly, trying to sort out what had happened to us. Adults were crying, otherwise well-mannered people showing sides I would never have dreamed of seeing; arguments raged even in close-knit families. Sane people were getting mad. I was suffocating from the condensed misery.

Shortly after the crowd calmed down, a heavysset police officer stuck his head into the archway and told us to leave our belongings inside, and line up in the yard so we would get acquainted with the rules of the "Ghetto."

"Ghetto?" The word had a fearful connotation. I connected it with Warsaw and the word jarred my mind. It means jail. It means death. I felt as if a pile of bricks crushed down on me.

The word awakened similar responses from other people too. I heard various remarks. The strongest came from the Christian wife of Attorney Spitzer. She had volunteered to accompany her husband and his son by his first wife.

She cried, "Jesus Christ, help us!"

The police officer began by saying that in case of an air raid, no matter what time of the day it might be, everyone must go inside the kilns. The lights were going to be turned off at a center location. He pointed at the small and only building and said that was the infirmary, with limited supplies of medical help.

Water would be brought in daily with a wagon. Each of us should pick up our ration. Today it was already late so we weren't going to receive any water. A loud roar rose from the disappointed crowd. I felt thirsty right away and swallowed some saliva. The officer said that latrines were near the rear wall. I told Mother I had never seen a latrine.

Smoking was strictly forbidden, and if anyone would think of escaping, he called our attention to the barbed wire and the platforms around the walls, where the guards would watch us day and night. The searchlights were able to reach any corner of the

yard. Then he concluded:

“Folks, let’s not forget the machine guns.”

I was pleased he called us “folks” rather than some synonyms for garbage.

Soon I had a need to find out about the latrine. Behind a poorly constructed reed fence, I saw a long trench partially filled with water. One long pole was suspended between two X-shaped posts, and another pole was above the first one. I saw a group of women with bare buttocks, squatting in a row, holding unto the upper post. The guard looked down at them. I dreaded the setup and ran back to Mother, telling her it was impossible to live under such conditions. She replied that there were people who had to live under more deplorable conditions. At least we were together. This made me angry. Back home, when I refused to eat my spinach, Mother would say, children were starving in Africa. Knowing that others suffered worse, never made me feel any better.

I scrambled over to the Ungers. Mr. Unger said we were more precious than kings, because even our defecation was well-guarded.

Father said there should be a law against such humiliations, and if there were no written laws, there should be one in every human’s heart. By then I was fed up with my father's continuous reference to the laws. There were laws to protect the animals, waterways, wildlife, national monuments, ruins of old castles, drunks and fools. But there were no laws to protect the Jews.

I didn’t communicate my feelings to Father. It was one thing to be rude and another one to be mature, and I hadn’t reached that point when I dared to be rude to my father. I knew he was already hurt by the collapse and uselessness of his theory that obeying the laws would solve everything.

We spent the rest of the afternoon getting settled. Not having a knife made eating

dinner complicated. We managed, and ate sparingly. The night began with fights for sleeping places. No one wanted to sleep beneath the light bulbs, or by the archways. The policemen of Fehervar rushed in and with the butts of their rifles they solved the problems.

I had a small pillow and wanted to lie on my back, but there wasn't enough room. We had to sleep in a row on our sides in a shape of crescents. Turning was possible only with mutual consent. My feet touched Mrs. Unger's feet. I had to pull my up my knees to avoid being kicked accidentally. Father suggested that short people should lie opposite to tall people so their feet wouldn't disturb each other. This was a good idea, only it created more tumult. Finally, that was settled too. I never slept with the lights on, and my eyes were fixed on the small light bulb over my head. Tiny moths flapped their wings beneath the light. They were free to fly in and out and over the fence. Yes, even moths had been given more freedom than Jews.

Grandfather snored loudly. He used to be called a "window rattler." We were given a variety of suggestions on how to muffle the sound, such as putting a pillow over his face, or sitting on his mouth. Children were crying constantly. A policeman stuck in his nose and warned if the mothers didn't know how to silence their children, the police had better ways. Another policeman joined in and shouted, "Smother them, or smash their heads against the brick wall!"

"Oh, my God," Aunt Giza cried and held Juli closer to her body.

The thin layer of straw gave no protection from dampness, and I had an urge to go to the latrine. A searchlight aimed directly at the white buttocks. Eta's Aunt Luci warned to be careful as when the feces hits the water, it splashes back.

I saw Eta adjusting her sanitary belt. We walked back to the kiln together. Neither one of us felt like talking.

Then it rained. The thunder awakened the sleeping crowd. Water flowed in

rivulets, soaking those lying by the archways. The people crouched near the center and shivered.

The sounds of the night Ghetto molded into a strange symphony. Snoring, crying, hissing, cursing, praying and the thunder composed an awesome concert.

Tuesday morning I awoke with a strange feeling, that I was a different person. I sat up and looked at my parents. Their faces were illuminated by the light coming through the nearby archway. Pressed into a mold as they lay on the straw, they seemed so helpless. They were no longer masters of their lives, no longer able to protect me or supply me with physical comfort. I was no longer their child. We were now on an equal level. From now on, I had to carry my burden, fight my own battles, lick my own wounds. That morning I discovered that I had matured. It was a harsh place to awaken to such a revelation.

I ran my hands down my aching body. "I've grown up," I was saying to my parents. "I've grown up," I said to the crowd. "I've grown up," I said to the sunbeam peeking through the archway. I've grown up and I smell like mouse-shit.

I waited for the first chance to act as a grownup, to make the best of our situation. When I saw that Father opened his eyes, I said, "Shall I ring for room service?" He rewarded me with a smile. It made me happy that he still knew how to smile. I kissed him. When Mother woke up, I kissed her too. I rolled the blankets into a horseshoe shape and leaned them against the wall, giving support to our backs. Father remarked I had done a good job. He had taught me many skills, reasoning, one never knows when one becomes useful. Unlike worldly goods that could be taken away from us, what we have learned, we always could keep.

Later on we crawled out of the kiln and saw many of the open stalls filled with

people. They were brought in during the rainstorm and resembled a group of wet gophers, standing at the sunny side of the kiln, drying themselves and warming up their chilled bodies.

When the water wagon came, we had to stand in a long line to receive our daily water ration. After quenching my thirst, I wished I could wash off the previous night's sweat and smell, but there was no place to undress in privacy. Seeing a pile of bricks standing nearby, waiting to be put to some use, I had an idea to build a bathhouse.

I found Lacko and Mikki sitting on a pile of bricks. I asked them if they would help me.

"What do you need a bathhouse for?" Mikki asked, "We are only going to stay for another day."

"Maybe," I said.

"What if it's forbidden to use the bricks?" Mikki was opposing my plan.

"You are sitting on them and nobody seems to mind," I said. The boys were convinced.

"Let's scout for some marker or a stick, so we could draw the floor plan," I said.

Lacko walked over to one of the bushes, near the wall, broke off a branch and asked, "What's next?"

I took away the branch and drew a line starting from the wall of the kiln and proceeded toward the yard.

Marton Szabo was looking on. "Not very straight," Marton said, grinning, and took the stick out of my hand. "How far do you want me to go?"

Thinking he was showing off, I explained that he was only a worker, I had the plan in my head. I grabbed Lacko's hand and posted him about five meters away from the wall. I walked ten paces to his right, stopped, and told Marton to connect us and

draw the line back to the wall. Marton obeyed, though, occasionally, he threw meaningful glances at Lacko and Mikki.

“Now let’s divide the bathhouse. I want a wall to be put up here,” I drew a mark in the dust.

“Why do you need a separating wall?” Lacko snickered. “Can’t people wait for their turn like they do at the city toilets?”

“Stop acting so silly,” I said. “I want to build a proper bathhouse.” Marton drew the separating line and we laid the bricks on the lines. Mrs. Szabo and Lilla watched Marton with joy. They were pleased that he had taken interest in something beside his own pain. Lilla also offered to help.

People gathered around and watched as we placed the next layer of bricks sideways and the next on top of it, constructing a thick wall. We used my father’s height to measure how high we should build the walls. He advised us as if he were an expert builder.

“I hope there isn’t any law against building a bathhouse,” I teased. He sighed, shook his head and smiled.

We left a narrow opening on each side, near the wall, and lay a broomstick across, then placed a blanket on each of the broomsticks. Inside, we built stands to hold the wash basins. Lacko suggested we also line the bottom with bricks, so while washing up, our feet wouldn’t get muddy.

We examined our building proudly and I said I’d be the first one to try. Lilla stood guard at the blanket to make sure no one entered while I washed myself. I said, I’d be the guard for her. Marton and Lacko had the same plans.

I stepped inside, undressed, and hummed an old nursery song. I was surprised as I heard myself. I removed my bra and a few dried blades of grass fell out. It was the last remnant of the clump I had brought from our garden. I placed them gently beside

me on the sand, and washed myself thoroughly, feeling fresh and clean. I was pleased with myself. I carried the basin of sudsy water far away from the sleeping places and spilled it on a patch of weeds. On the way back I remembered leaving the blades of grass in the bathhouse. By the time I returned, the grass blades were gone. Oh, well, I just have to store in my mind the beauty of our garden.

The policemen examined the bathhouse and even they agreed it was cleverly constructed. Soon, lines were formed at both sides, and the people waited patiently to cleanse themselves. Our friends and neighbors congratulated my parents for having an industrious daughter who could devise a really practical thing under such precarious conditions. Rabbi Stern thanked us for the splendid idea and walked to the men's side, draping a towel over his arm, smiling as if he were entering the luxurious bath of the Hotel Ritz.

A small open-air kitchen was set up near the office building, and at noon we were told to line up for soup. I took a small bowl full of potato soup. It was thin, lumpy and very salty.

"What an idiot," I heard someone complaining. "On a hot day, when the water is scarce, the cook should be beheaded." He poured the soup into the dust.

Grandfather refused to eat the soup, saying it wasn't kosher. Another idea struck me. I built a little stove from the bricks. Lacko gathered some twigs and lumber pieces. We had no matches. He tried to rub the sticks together Boy-Scout style. It didn't work. I went to the kitchen, poked a couple of sticks into the fire and carried them in our bucket. I lit the straw and started the fire.

Aunt Giza had brought with her some raw potatoes and she put them up in a pot of water. Many people gaped at us. Young couples with infants copied our invention and they prepared baby food on the makeshift stove.

Now, even strangers flocked to congratulate my parents. I felt disappointed. It was about time that I should be complimented directly to my face. "Good work, adult person." Then I figured maybe adulthood was not showing on my surface, only existed inside of me.

In the afternoon a new transport arrived from Feherwar. I saw many of my former schoolmates. I met Adrienne. She used to sit next to me in Hebrew School and we both had a crush on young Rabbi Boros. When rumors circulated in the city about single girls being taken to labor camps, Adrienne married her boyfriend. They had no honeymoon. They spent exactly five minutes together after the ceremony, as he was serving in the Jewish Forced Labor Corps. I congratulated her and we hugged each other. Rabbi Boros got married too and his wife was pregnant. They were also here. Even though she hated history, Adrienne's sister, Babette, married our old history teacher. I saw Mr. Kiss, our mathematics teacher carried in to our ghetto on a stretcher, because the soles of his feet had been torn to shreds by the police. He had withheld a few antique coins, when he was supposed to hand in his valuables.

Adrienne pointed out the owner of the city's classiest cafe whose owner permitted only the elite gentiles to patronize. I recalled fancy Miss Varady, and the diamond-studded cross she wore on a necklace, even at the swimming pool. It was surely a surprise to see her. Nose high up in the air, she pranced on her spike-heeled, red sandals among us as if we were insignificant ants, though she no longer wore the cross.

I saw a tall, young, good-looking blond man, whom half the school's girl population had been chasing, but he would ignore us then. He only dated the daughters of high-ranking officers, occasionally the officers' wives too. So, he was also Jewish.

I visited the Arnstein family. Emery and I lived at their home while attending business school. Mr. Arnstein told me since their son had been taken prisoner on the Russian front, Mrs. Arnstein had been paralyzed. I greeted Mrs. Arnstein, but she didn't recognize me. I took courage and visited Rabbi Boros. He looked tired and lean. His petite wife had a big stomach. Rabbi Boros was glad to see me, but wished it had been under better circumstances.

Here were the wealthiest and the poorest Jews of the city, equally bearing the burden of our people. I wondered if the poor had felt some satisfaction in the irony of it.

There was no way of telling time in the Ghetto. When it was getting darker, I remembered the misery of the previous night, when Aunt Margit became soaking wet as she slept near the archway. What would happen if it rained again? I kneeled down to the archway and examined the soil. It appeared that with some alterations, the flow of water could be diverted. I picked up a few broken bricks, and used them to back up the low embankments, filled the embankments with earth and piled them higher than the earth inside the kiln, patted them down and visualized the water flowing away from the entrance. After finishing one side, Lacko did the same on the other side. We advised those people, near the other two archways to build their own embankments.

In Hungary the etiquette taught us it was improper to accept compliments. For instance, when we were praised for wearing a pretty dress, we would say, it was something old we had picked out from our clothes cabinet. Now I accepted the compliments, said "Thank you," and my chest expanded with pride.

Just before going to sleep I asked Aunt Margit to accompany me to the latrine. We looked up to the guard, and tried to sit down when he walked away. I was shocked when I saw Officer Morvay stand and gaze at the women's section.

"I'm not going, Margit," I said. "Even if I die, I won't let him see me." Millie, the big mouth, heard me. She put her hands on her hips, drew herself tall and shouted:

"Hey you, up there, get away from there, or I'll dip a brick into the shit and throw it right at you."

"All right, you old witch, but remember, this might be your last chance to be seen by a man," the officer replied.

"Anyone who is doing what you do, in my opinion, is not a man."

Morvay walked away without any further comment. I decided, from now on, I would watch and go when Millie went to the latrine.

The second night was almost as bad as the first one, except the kiln dwellers realized, if they quarreled, they would bring the anger of the policemen upon themselves. Sounds were muffled and we settled down on the straw. It did rain, and those who slept in the open-air stalls, stormed into the kilns. Then a new transport arrived. The people were already soaked to their skin, and they, too, fought their way into the kilns.

"Get out, get out, you are crushing us," someone cried. "Get out, we were here first."

"What does that prove?" a deep sobbing voice replied, "You don't own this damn place." And the shouting and shoving continued. Those who managed to squeeze inside, begged for dry clothing. We opened our suitcases. I gave away one of my favorite cotton dresses, Mother gave up two of hers. Father handed out a couple of shirts and some socks too. I remembered how charitable my parents used to be. I knew Father had given his suit to a beggar. And even though now we were the beggars, my parents still remained kind-hearted.

For the rest of the night everyone stood pressed either against the wall, or

against a slouching, tired body.

On Wednesday morning we stood in the water line when a policeman called Mother, Margit and me to the gate. We approached fearfully, but when the gate opened we saw Aunt Ella, Uncle Ignatz and Erika standing on the outside. The policeman told us we had five minutes to spend with each other and we should talk loud enough for him to hear. Then he moved a few steps away, leaned against the wall and lit up a cigarette.

It took us one minute just to kiss and hug. Mother said she would talk to Ignatz. Margit turned to Ella and I was left to talk with Erika. She was a bright child. Coached by her parents, she knew what to tell us. The family was on the way to Budapest to see Grandmother and on the way back they would visit us again. Erika told me that the Jewish homes were locked up. And when Uncle Harry returned for a short leave from the labor force, and heard what had happened to the family, he became sick. When he felt better he wrote a letter to Giza, and gave it to Ignatz, but the policeman had taken it away from him. Erika said they had brought us some food. "I miss all of you," she cried. I, too, was about to cry.

The policeman checked his watch and warned that the time was up. We kissed each other again and were led back into the Ghetto. Before giving us the food, the police searched it thoroughly.

Anxious for news about the outside world, the people in our kiln bombarded us with questions. Margit explained that not much could be said within five minutes.

Mother divided the food among our family. We were surprised to see the rare delicacies Ella had brought. She must have spent a small fortune. We were astonished that the policemen hadn't confiscated the food for their own purpose, although we had no way of knowing how much food our relatives had brought in.

We also received a jug of milk. Mother said, with our permission, she would give it to the hungry babies.

Grandfather enjoyed the hard-boiled eggs the most. After eating, he sat on a pile of bricks and belched with content. Juli picked her teeth with a straw and pulled out a tiny sliver of meat. She noticed Lacko was watching her.

“Do you want this piece?”

“No, thank you, it’s all yours,” Lacko said and smiled.

She put it back into her mouth and said, “Yummy, yummy.”

We exchanged information. I didn’t mention Harry’s illness, or the letter he wrote to Giza. There wasn’t much Giza could do about it. So why make her worry?

Later on, there was trouble around the bathhouse. The policemen said they knew someone had been smoking in there. I had doubts since a wisp of smoke could hardly be visible from the guard posts, and feared it had to be an informer.

Knowing that we had the last contact with the outside world, we were the prime suspects. Again, our luggage was searched. Father came up with his worn-out cliché, that he had never broken a law in his life. The policemen were not convinced. They even smelled our breath for traces of smoke.

Naturally, the policemen were upset because they could not find even one cigarette in our luggage, and so they rampaged over everyone else’s belongings. They tore and tossed and swore without any success, leaving awful destruction behind them.

I was blamed for the whole incident as it was my idea to build the bathhouse in the first place. Some people suggested we should tear down the walls to prevent future problems. I insisted that the benefit of having even a small privacy, outweighed the unpleasant risk. The walls remained standing.

People eyed each other suspiciously. I thought there had to be a spy among us.

Lacko and Mikki were talking about becoming detectives and asked me to join them. It offered an exciting way to spend the long, dull hours and I agreed. The boys had a hot debate over who should be Sherlock Holmes.

"Gentlemen, there is no sense arguing, we must make some plans," I said with authority of a person older than they. "We have to keep our eyes on every suspicious person who goes near the guardhouse or is frequently with the policemen, or stalks near the crowds and talks to too many people."

"Let's start with the last option," Mikki said. "I noticed a suspicious man with a thick, black beard."

"Because of his beard?"

"No, he does just what you have said. He walks around and talks to many people," Mikki explained.

"We should follow him, but not to make him aware of our presence, we should go separately," I suggested. And we did.

Soon after our first attempt to catch a spy, we failed. The man with the black beard was a theological student. He talked to people and gave them spiritual comfort.

"Who is next?" Mikki asked.

"In my opinion, we should follow someone who is clean," Lacko kidded. That did make sense. None of us had enough water for regulator cleansing. Anyone cleaner than the rest of us must be an outsider. We picked out a well-groomed, middle-aged fellow and followed him cautiously.

"We have to find out which group he belongs to," I said. Mikki suggested we talk to the rabbis. They were bound to know their congregants.

Lacko came up with a logical possibility. "What if he isn't religious?"

Since there were no other clues, we mingled among the people of various villages, asking questions about a person we called, "Mek," the Hungarian word for

spy, spelled backwards.

We did talk with several rabbis without much success, until Rabbi Boros remembered when his group was brought in, he saw the man we called, "Mek," joining them from the side of the wall, while everyone else came from the road. Rabbi Boros said Mr. Mek owned an army suitcase.

Sure enough, at one of the open stalls we saw our Mr. Mek standing near such a suitcase. A few minutes later he left the stall and walked over to the gate, where he talked to a couple of policemen.

"Stay close to him and watch, while Lacko and I investigate his suitcase by the stalls," I instructed Mikki.

"You can't do that!" Mikki was not like his father. He always saw the dark side of things, and he said, "Even if you could, what would you prove?"

"Maybe we could find some clues," Lacko beamed.

"How?" Mikki asked.

"I could chase Lacko toward the suitcase, that's how," I said, and thought adults don't go around chasing children without a reason. Then it occurred to me. Lacko would take an item belonging to me and I would have to chase after him.

I reached into my skirt pocket and found a handkerchief, and told Lacko to hold it in his hand and run. As men and women sat around idly, their faces blank, their eyes hollow, seemingly waiting for the Messiah, I saw they weren't paying any attention to us. I shouted after Lacko, "Give me back my handkerchief," and chased him. To make the act more believable, I shook my hand at him. Lacko ran and tumbled, but the suitcase stood firm. He got up and whispered:

"Chase me again, I think I saw a folded newspaper sticking out of the pocket of the man's overcoat. It is tucked partially under the pillow."

"You must be mistaken," I said. "How and why could anyone own a newspaper?"

"Believe me," he said.

We repeated the act. This time Lacko aimed accurately and pushed the pillow aside. A corner of a newspaper could be seen. Lacko winked at me.

Back home we used to play a card game, called, "Save the Castle." We laid a bunch of cards on the table and built a "castle" over them. The goal was to pull out the cards without having the "castle" fall. Lacko, with his steady hands, was always a winner.

"Save the castle, Lacko," I urged. He pulled gently at the corner of the paper far enough for us to read, "Rome." I squatted behind him, shielding his body with my skirt. He pulled some more. "Rome capitulated," we read on. I felt as if an unseen blast had lifted me off the ground. Lacko tucked back the paper, and we ran away, just in time. Mikki was motioning for us to head back toward the kilns.

We congratulated each other on being good detectives, and told Father our findings. He was elated about Rome falling to the Allies, although he was disturbed that a spy did exist. He also questioned the sanity of obtaining a newspaper because "Mek" shouldn't be reading it anyway. Since no one else could have been able to own a paper, that would have given away his cover. Nothing made any sense here anyhow. Father allowed us to spread both news.

Professor Sonnenfeld, a geography teacher, drew a map of Italy on the ground. Even without his educated calculation, we could figure out how close Rome was to our part of Hungary. The people of the Ghetto had something exciting, something hopeful to talk about. They reasoned that it would not be long before the Americans reached us. And for the rest of that day at least, our noses were not hanging, the corners of our mouths curved upward, and animated conversations were going on everywhere. Of course, having a spy among us made people cautious and they looked around frequently, making sure the "Mek" wasn't listening.

The night was clear and bright. The moon played between the clouds and the crickets were chirping. Edit sighed, "This night is made for love."

"And air raids," Lilla added.

No love, only an air raid.

Suddenly, the sound of the crickets was drowned out by the wailing of the air raid sirens, tearing into the serene night air. We huddled together in the kilns. Soon the policemen chased the stall people inside. The tumult was so devastating that there were several injuries. The noise was earsplitting and nerve-racking, only the roar of the first airplane silenced the crowd. "Let's pray," I heard a whisper. I didn't pray for my safety, but for the safety of the pilots up in the planes. The anti-aircraft guns were crackling. The earth shook from the bombs. Then the all clear was sounded. The lights were turned on. Juli woke up.

"Why is everybody so quiet?" she asked and rubbed her eyes. "Crickets." Nestling close to her mother, Juli fell back to sleep.

On Friday morning at the water line, Marton met a young redhead, Pirrie Ganser. If there was such a thing in the Ghetto as falling in love at first sight, this had to be it. From that moment on, they walked together, and talked, and sat, and ate, and walked, and talked some more. Mrs. Szabo and Lilla were delighted and we were happy that the young people were finding love even in a place like the Ghetto.

During the afternoon, heated discussions raged behind the bathhouse walls, as the rabbis debated how the Sabbath should be sanctified under such unholy conditions. Our rabbi's voice was the most powerful one. He said that the Sabbath was more than lighting the candles, putting on holiday clothes and going to the synagogue. Sabbath was within each of us, even here.

The debate was interrupted when a high-ranking German officer entered the

gate, accompanied by a group of lower-ranking officers. The Hungarian policemen scooted around obediently, shouting and making us line up in rows of five. First, we were counted. Then the officers looked us over row by row, making faces, as if they were examining rotten eggs. They departed as fast as they came.

The dilemma of keeping a proper Sabbath turned into a guessing game about the purpose of the sudden inspection. This continued until darkness fell. Then the rabbis gathered on both sides of the bathhouse. We heard from the outside:

“Blessed are Thou Lord, who spreadest the protection of peace over us and over thy people, Israel.”

Grandfather kissed us and whispered, “Good Sabbath, children.”

And the peace of Sabbath settled over the Ghetto.

Chapter 2

I lay on the straw, but sleep avoided me. Turning from one side to the other side was impossible. The foul odor penetrated into my nose. I was gasping for some fresh air. Pressed close to me, Mother sighed frequently. She couldn't find rest either on the crushed straw. "Would you like to go out with me for a walk?" I asked. She said it was too much of a chore to struggle her way out among the sleeping bodies, but if I wanted to venture, she would accompany me. I told her I'd find my way alone.

I watched where I put my foot and managed to reach the archway, stepped outside, took a deep breath and gazed up at the stars, wishing I could view them from the other side of the fence. Someone touched my shoulder. I turned back and saw Magda Schwartz standing behind me.

"Do you mind if I join you?" she asked softly.

"I would like that," I said, and we walked out into the passageway between the stalls.

"I can't sleep," Magda began, "The scent of pine trees is driving me crazy, even though I can't see any of them."

"Maybe there are some beyond the wall."

"Oh, this is probably only in my mind. You see, when they came to take us away, I left him standing beneath a pine tree. I should have told him I loved him. Now he'll never know." She looked up and far away, as if searching for a face in the dark. Her shoulders were shaking. The moonlight illuminated her tears.

I wished I had the power to comfort her. What could I say to make her feel better? A few moments of silence wedged between us before I said to Magda that with God's

help, she would see him again.

“I don’t believe in God anymore. I used to pray and pray when our mother was ill, but she died; then Father became ill, and after many years of suffering, he died too, leaving us with huge doctors’ bills he incurred during Mother’s illness. Our dear aunt came to work with us and tried to help us repay the debts. She became an invalid, and you wouldn’t believe her medical costs.” Magda wiped her tears. I stroked her arm.

“I remember how it used to be with Emery.”

“A few months after our aunt died, our brother, Joseph, was taken into the Jewish Forced Labor Corps. Then he was reported missing, and not long after he died in Russia. I tell you, I would have been satisfied to have one good month in my life. Since the law forbade us to own a lumber yard, and as you know from your own store, Jews were no longer allowed to sell the majority of their wares, I decided to cook for a group of young men who worked for your Mr. Kertes. I worked very hard. My sister, Lena, warned me that I’d get sick if I didn’t slow down. I did not listen, and Lena was right. I became very sick. The men left to eat elsewhere, except one. He stood by and nursed me. I got well. He said he loved me, but I was afraid if I told him that I loved him too, God would punish me for having a few moments of joy.”

“I doubt that God punishes us for being happy,” I said. “You’ll see, someday, when the war is over, you will be happy.” We strolled near the wall until Lena came out looking for Magda and we returned to the kiln. I wanted to lie down, but my place was already taken. I stood weeping. What was I asking for, happiness? I only needed a narrow space on a strip of straw. God, is that such a big thing to ask for? Chickens are entitled to that much.

Perhaps by instinct Mother noticed me, or maybe she was waiting for me to return. She helped me squeeze myself between the sleepers.

On Saturday morning, Mr. Unger arose early. He knelt beside his wife, holding a bunch of wilted dandelions and waited for her to open her eyes. When she looked up, he smiled at her.

“I told you I would take you to an exotic place for our 25th wedding anniversary.”

She sat up and embraced him. Their relatives gathered, and congratulated them. We, who slept nearby, searched our luggage for some small gift. Mother gave them five lumps of sugar, a couple of soggy biscuits, and a few sheets of toilet paper, whose value rose higher with each passing day.

Edit sang a beautiful love song to her parents. Mikki kissed and hugged them, then went out to the yard to be with Lacko.

Later during the day, recruiting officers came into the Ghetto and tried to convince the young men to join the Jewish Forced Labor Corps. They promised that those who signed up could return to visit and also could bring back food to their families. Those who thought about signing up faced a difficult decision. Could they believe what the recruiters said?

The whole Ghetto became involved in the debate. At least this was an issue people cared to talk about. Even strangers introduced themselves and shared an opinion. Everyone who was able to walk, was in the yard. But when we returned to the kiln, we discovered that our entire supply of toilet paper was missing.

“Now we have to use leaves like the rest of the folks,” Mother said, grinning.

“Yes, Father moaned, “but even those are in short supply.” My parents talked about the missing tissue with the rest of our family and friends, as if they were discussing the fate of stolen crown jewels. Finally, Father said he would ask some of the recruits to try to contact Ella, and maybe she could bring us some tissue. Then he walked out.

A well-built, young woman with short cropped, dark brown hair, wearing a white linen designer suit, strolled by as if promenading on the Danube's Board Walk. There were only a few people inside the kiln, yet instead of walking around us, she stepped over our feet. The young woman strutted to the end of the kiln, and looked over the place as if on a treasure hunt. She stopped on her way back and without introducing herself, turned to Mother and said in a deep, raspy, manlike voice, "I heard someone stole your toilet paper. Thieves took a bar of my Lux soap. You should go to the commandant and report it. Let him search every luggage. It is bad enough to suffer from our enemies, without having to be afraid of Jewish criminals."

"We wouldn't go that far," Mother said calmly.

Miss Lux Soap looked down on Mother as if she were speaking a foreign language.

Another young woman approached us. While smaller and slimmer than Miss Lux Soap, she had the same haircut, and bore a slight resemblance to the other woman.

"I'm sorry," she said to Mother. She grabbed Miss Lux Soap's arm, and trying to placate her, said softly:

"Come, Vikki, I'll give you my soap."

Vikki raised her shoulders, turned her nose up and frowned. "I hate low class folks," she grunted in parting. I was about to give her a piece of my mind, but Mother put her hand on my knees. "You should feel sorry for Vikki. she needs help." Mother remarked...

This was only the beginning of our acquaintanship with Vikiki. On Sunday morning a few men from a nearby labor camp were permitted into the Ghetto for a short visit. Several of them were married and they asked us if they could use our bathhouse for a few minutes of privacy.

Lilla and Edit, who by then had become close friends, offered to sit by the curtains so no one would venture inside and disturb the couples. Vikki strolled by in a blue

shantung dress. Although the dress was slightly wrinkled, anyone who knew anything about fashion could see that the dress was expensive. I was sitting with Edit on one side of the bathhouse, when Vikki stopped by and said:

“Under such circumstances, these animals could only think of screwing.”

Edit jumped up, angrily. “They are not animals, and they are not screwing, and at any rate who are you to make such a judgment?”

“I’m not trying to judge anybody. All I’m saying is that this is not the time nor the place for the stupid whores.”

A young woman joined us, the same one who the day before had offered her soap to Vikki.

“Please forgive Vikki, she isn’t feeling well. We ran out of water and she just saw a policeman drinking from a flask.”

We could understand how it felt to be thirsty. Being Sunday, the water wagon didn’t come to the Ghetto. And on Saturday nobody had a large enough container to hold two days’ water ration. To save our supply, Mother wouldn’t allow us to wash ourselves until Monday. However, the policemen had enough water. With parched lips and dry mouths, we watched them as they drank, including one guard who rinsed out his cup and spilled the water over the wall. The children were crying from thirst, yet I doubted any of us would have exploded like Vikki did.

“Who are you to stand up for Vikki?” I asked.

“I’m Regina Senes, her cousin,” the soft-spoken woman said, and smiled.

“We don’t have it any better, Regina,” Edit said and sat back at the door. Regina led Vikki away.

“I’m so thirsty, I would give anything for a glass of water.” Edit swallowed a few times.

I recognized Officer Fekete walking on guard.

“Should we ask the policeman?” I kidded.

“I would rather die of thirst.”

“Do you want me to try?”

Edit sighed. “Would you?”

I went into the kiln and brought out a cup, walked up to Officer Fekete, greeted him and said that I needed some water for a sick child. I was amazed how easy it was to lie, and wondered how Father would react if he heard about it.

Officer Fekete removed a slender bottle from his knapsack and poured water into the cup. My eyes popped out as I watched the precious liquid flow. He handed me the cup, and I thanked him. Edit noticed immediately and ran to me. “You are such a darling to do this for me.” She grabbed the cup and drank without stopping.

I saw Mother coming. “Oh, Edit, please, don’t drink it alone,” I told her, but it was too late.

“Sorry, it was only a few swallows,” she said.

I told Mother what happened and she shook her head in surprise. “Did you drink any?” she asked.

“No, I didn’t.”

“That was very unselfish of you,” she said, and kissed me.

By noon the water supply was so low that our cooks pleaded for water to make soup. Everyone gave a little. Then the nurses begged for water for the infirmary, and we gave them some too.

It was an unusually warm day for June and by sundown most people suffered immensely. Juli, who never did suck her thumb, saw other children do it and she also put her thumb into her mouth. I wished I were Juli’s age.

On Monday, shortly after the noonday meal — a piece of dry sourdough bread and a bowl of tasteless, thin soup — the policemen set up a long table in the middle of the yard. They placed a stack of papers on top. Father remarked it might be some census-taking.

We were made to line up, and when Father reached the table, he was told that on behalf of his family, he should sign the document, forfeiting voluntarily our Hungarian citizenship.

Father's face turned ashen and he gasped for air.

"Voluntarily," he read loudly, "Phuy," he said with a force that suggested he had reached the end of his patience.

Father grabbed the pen and signed his name, still lamenting, as if he were signing his own order of execution. He slammed down the pen, took out his wallet and pulled out the documents that proved his rights of ownership to the various military medals. He tore them into pieces and with a pained look, he handed them to Mother.

"Now you have some toilet paper for at least two days," he roared, and stormed away. Her face flushed, Mother let the pieces of paper float about her. Their value couldn't have been measured anyway with any existing currency. As the slips glided around before falling, no one grabbed for them nor did anyone bend down to fetch even a small bit. I knew how they felt. It was against my upbringing to abuse such an honorable and sacred document, like debasing a part of the flag. But the policemen trudged over the pieces without comment.

Later on, after Father accepted the unchangeable decree, I asked him what the authorities were going to do with us if we no longer were Hungarian citizens.

"They will deport us," he said in a tone reserved for death.

A baby girl was born that day. If she lived long enough to own a birth certificate, here nationality would read, "Stateless."

That night a bombing raid shook the earth. The sky lit up like daylight, but the outdoor people stayed outside in their stalls and those from the kilns came outdoors. Nobody cared to save themselves.

On Tuesday morning our names were called again. Giza begged Margit to let her accompany us. Margit agreed. The three of us walked out to the gate where the policeman on guard happened to be Officer Morvay. He told us that we would have ten minutes to talk.

Little Erika ran to me and I picked her up and hugged her. She put her soft face near mine, her blond curls touching my cheeks, and held her arms tightly around my neck. Her dress was without a wrinkle. She smelled fresh and sweet. I noticed the difference between us more now than before.

I asked Erika how Grandmother was feeling, and she said, "Better." Grandmother made her promise to tell us that "Sons of her brother, Jake, had come to visit Charlotte, but they were held up at her house." Erika spoke quietly and repeatedly looked back at Morvay as if afraid he might hear her.

I was confused. It made no sense what Erika said. I put her down and asked her to repeat the message. After she did so, I was still puzzled. I asked if she knew anything about Tibor. She said he was already working, and would visit me soon. I remembered my appearance when we were first introduced during that lovely September afternoon. My head felt light when I thought how much dirtier I was now.

Erika slipped her hand into the pocket of her dress and pulled out something that resembled a paper scroll. She handed it to me. Since I had no pockets, I glanced behind me, and believing I wasn't observed, I slipped the scroll inside the opening of my dress. I hugged and kissed her and strolled over to talk to Ella.

Ella's eyes were red as if she had been crying for hours. I asked if the policeman

had given her some unfavorable information about us. This was a foolish question because even if he had, Ella surely wouldn't have told us. She hugged me and turned away without saying a word. I kissed Uncle Ignatz. Trembling and fighting back his tears, he told me to take care of myself. They acted as if they were saying good-bye to us.

Officer Morvay raised his hand, signaling that our time was up. It didn't seem like ten minutes had passed. One more quick embrace and we were led away. We kept looking back at Ella, but she had already turned toward the road. I grabbed Mother's arm. She walked very slowly as if having difficulties in lifting her legs.

At the gate, Officer Morvay stopped us for a body search. I thought this strange as we weren't searched previously. First, he ran his hands over Mother's body, then Giza's. She cringed when he put his hand into her blouse. My turn was last. His hand shook as he reached into my bosom. I felt like slapping his face. He avoided looking at me. When his cold, probing fingers discovered the scroll, he lifted it out and put it into his pocket.

After the search was over, he handed us the food Ella had brought. Giza said she wondered how we could eat in front of people who were already starving.

As we walked toward the kiln, Mother asked whether I knew what the officer had found. I told her if it had been something illegal, he would have let us know by now. I convinced her, but not myself. I was worried that Morvay would find more ways to get even with me.

Mother divided the food. We even received a large thermos bottle of milk. Giza said we should save it for Grandfather as he still persisted in not eating non-kosher food.

The decision was made to eat inside the bathhouse in order not to make the hungry people envious.

Lacko and I gorged ourselves on fresh bread and butter. Margit suggested if we ate slowly, the food would last longer.

Juli took small bites and said she liked to eat slowly.

We saved part of the food and wrapped it back into the dish towels they arrived in. Lacko volunteered to guard the leftovers against hungry prowlers. It was obvious that nobody had told Ella to bring us toilet tissue. Margit said that after we finished the rest of the food, we should tear the dish towels into pieces and use them.

Sitting back with contentment only a full stomach can provide, we exchanged our news. Mother was told about Irma and family and about Grandmother's successful recovery. Tibor was able to visit them frequently as being on the streets of Budapest was dangerous for Jews. Irma had asked Tibor to inquire about Father's relatives. He brought back the information that they were doing as well as expected under such conditions.

Giza was told her husband, Harry, was in a military hospital. She blamed us for not telling her that Harry was ill. Mother explained since there was nothing Giza could have done, we hadn't wanted to alarm her.

"I could have prayed." Giza pouted and turned aside, crying.

I told Father what Erika had said about the sons of Jake. Father scratched the top of his head. He always did that when he had a hard puzzle to solve.

"Let me see. This sounds like a good one," he chuckled. Mother and I exchanged glances and smiled.

He turned to Grandfather and asked. "Who is Jake?"

"Don't you remember? He lives in Chicago, in America."

"Aha, America. First clue. Now let's see who is Charlotte?"

"I used to have a French nanny, her name was Charlotte. She once told me if I ate the brown spot of an apple, I would have had bad dreams."

Father clapped his hands. "I got it," he exclaimed joyfully. "the invasion of France had started." He hummed a few bars of the "Rakoczy March," and with youthful, bouncing steps, marched to our rabbi. He alerted Professor Sonnenfeld too. Again, the professor drew a map on the ground, and within a few minutes he became the most popular person in the Ghetto. The news of the invasion spread quickly as everybody speculated how long it would take the Allied Armies to reach Hungary.

Father was in a good mood. He drew his own map, and explained how Germany would be divided between the victorious Allies. He gave the western part to the United States, England and France, the eastern part to Russia. And since the Americans were already in Italy, he would let them keep the "Big Boot."

The optimists had a great time, but the pessimists were not so sure about our fast deliverance.

My father's optimism was short-lived, for deep down within himself, the force of pessimism still lurked, ready to merge at the first chance. Father could have been crowned the king of the pessimists. Less than an hour after the splendid news, Father was telling a group of men the story of the two lobsters.

"The lobsters were pulled out of the water and placed on dry land. The pessimistic lobster said, 'Brother, we are out of the water; we are going to die.'

"The optimist replied, 'Don't worry, we aren't dead yet.' A few moments later they were placed into a bucket of water. The optimist said, 'I told you so.' The lobster man took the lobsters to the market, where a woman bought them and put them into her basket. The pessimist whined, 'You see, we are out of water, we are surely going to die.'

"But the optimist said, 'Trust in God, we will be back in water soon.'

The woman carried the lobsters home and dropped them into a pot of boiling water. With his last red breath the optimist said, 'I told you we will be in water.'"

It didn't matter whether we were optimists or pessimists because on Wednesday, we were awakened at sunrise, and told to line up in the yard and bring our luggage with us. Again, the long table was set up and again everyone was searched. After that, we walked back to the fright yard to the sight of empty boxcars gaping at us. During the boarding, while I struggled with my suitcases, I became separated from my parents. I shouted their names, but in the frantic, riotous confusion, they didn't hear me.

Officer Morvay saw me and came over. He grabbed my suitcases, and looked into every boxcar until he found my parents. He lifted the suitcases up in the boxcar, and helped me climb in.

"I'm sorry about the money your little cousin had brought for you," Morvay said. "You would have gotten into big trouble if any other officer had found it on you."

I leaned toward the man and thanked him. He said, "God be with you."

A young couple struggling to get a baby buggy inside the boxcar, gave me such a shove that I landed near the wall. I tried to rise. I was pushed back again and again. I gave up. As I sat on the floor, I could see the blue and black rooster feathers of Morvay's helmet. So, he had some decency in him after all.

I stretched my neck over the head of a stout man who was sitting in front of me and saw my mother standing nearby. She pulled me up and hugged me as if I were her lost lamb. We were pushed and landed in a stranger's lap.

"Well, hello ladies," the man said, and I was sure he had a smile on his face. We scanned the crowd, but couldn't spot the rest of our family. The scene was chaotic. Close to us an elderly couple was crying. They had lost their luggage that contained their meager food supply. Young children, separated from their parents, were screaming. Parents cried for their children. People fought for a space under the barb wired window where a little air circulated through. In one spot, a shapely matron's arm was pinned against a nail in the wall. "This is hell," she yelled.

"Hell," roared a thundering voice we recognized as Grandfather's. We were happy and relieved to hear his guiding voice leading us to the rest of our family. We elbowed our way, trying not to hurt anyone or get hurt. Mother cried out when she noticed Father's head stretching over a pile of suitcases in search for us. He first reached out for Mother, then for me and pulled us both across. I landed with my face on a spot no larger than a mosquito's footprint.

"Mommy, oh, Mommy, I'm hurt!" Mother pulled me to herself in the same way Giza held Juli.

The air was hot and stuffy from the compressed human bodies. Yes, this must be hell.

The door was shut. I felt trapped. I thought of my school days when there should have been a course in how to survive physical suffering such as being locked up and forced to live with wild goats, and a student would receive a good grade if he or she were able to avoid being gored. I would mention this to the rabbi, I thought. Naturally, he would say God will provide us with endurance and strength.

At last, the train pulled out of the station and the air began to circulate. The crying died down. I could clearly hear the clicking sound of the chains on the doors. I remembered a former nanny. To frighten me, she would threaten that the devil would come and get me, that I should stop crying and listen to the rattling of his chains. Now there was no doubt in my mind that indeed, I was in the hands of the devil while riding in the packed cattle car.

After a short ride the train stopped and the door slid open. Two state policemen jumped up and counted the crowd. They both came up with a different number. Cursing loudly, they counted us again, and again, without much success.

"Stay put, you God-fucking Jews, so we can get an accurate count," hollered one of the officers. We became motionless like a mouse facing a snake.

"Officers, there are 75 of us," Father spoke up, and out of sheer annoyance they believed him.

"What the hell," spat out one of the officers.

"Kindergarten dropouts," remarked a gentleman with thick, black-rimmed eyeglasses. In reply, the officer swung his fist and knocked the glasses off the man's nose.

One of the officers jumped off the train. A few minutes later he returned with one empty pail and one filled with water.

"Now we have the comfort of the Orient Express," smirked a gray-bearded gentleman, "but don't use the toilet until the train is in motion." He flashed his white teeth and repeated the same sentence in four different languages.

The door was slammed again, and the two strange policemen sat quietly at the door. Their presence made us control our outbursts.

Giza called to our attention that our companions, with the exception of the Schwartz sisters, were all strangers to us. I looked around. Giza was right.

The gray-bearded gentlemen said softly. "The *Malach Hamoves* (the Angel of Death) is driving the train."

Women wept. Couples clung to each other. Children buried their heads into their mothers' laps. My father put his arms around both of us. Juli held onto Giza with one hand and to Grandfather with the other one. Lacko was trying to act like an adult.

"Mama, dear, don't cry, soon everything is going to be better." Margit stroked Lacko's wet hair that used to be light blond, now almost black.

The train picked up speed and the water splashed over. A woman nearby was drenched. She begged, that to lower the water level, each one of us should take a sip. Suitcases were opened, and since the space was limited, a fight erupted. Harsh words were exchanged, and I felt embarrassed that the policemen had to witness Jews

fighting Jews. Yet when this problem was settled, another one arose. The children began to use the empty pail, and soon we worried that the pail of excrement would fill up and spill over.

One of the policemen gave a firm order that one person must hold the pail at all times. No one volunteered. With the tip of his bayonet, the policeman pointed at the gentleman with the silver hair, the one who knew the train signs in four languages, and told him to hold his arms steadily around the pail.

"Oh, Papa Jelineck, let me do it," pleaded a slim, young woman.

Papa Jelineck shook his head. "It's all right, Rose, dear. This doesn't smell any worse than a ruptured appendix."

My mother took a large square scarf out of her bag and said, "Maybe this will help." We passed the scarf over to Mr. Jelineck. He covered the pail and thanked Mother with a courteous bow of his head.

Lacko hoisted himself up to the window.

"I don't know which direction we are going," he said.

"If you see vineyards, we're heading west. If you see wheat fields, it means we are riding east," Grandfather said.

"I only see cows, Grandfather," Lacko replied, and we laughed.

It was getting darker. Since there were no lights in the boxcar, everyone thought to have dinner, while there was still some daylight left. The shuffling with the suitcases began again.

I said, "First, the people on one side should open their suitcases and after they finish eating, those on the other side could eat." I was surprised how well my suggestion was taken. Mother went a step further. She advised that only one person from each family should open a suitcase, and after the food from that one was consumed another suitcase should be opened. The people agreed without any

argument.

Mother took out a small bottle of water, moistened a rag and passed it around for us to wash our hands before eating. Then she opened our suitcase. We had no knives, so she tore bits of sausage from the bulk and handed each of us a piece.

Giza gave some to Grandfather, but he refused to touch it. "I lived like a Jew, and I will die like a Jew."

"Please, Papa, there won't be any kosher food waiting for us where we are going," Giza pleaded. Still, Grandfather stuck firmly to his conviction.

Mother pulled out the thermos jug, a gift from Ella. She unscrewed the top and looked inside. "There is some milk left for you." She poured the milk into the cup. Grandfather tasted it and said it was a bit sour, but he drank it down anyway and asked if there was more. Mother poured the rest of the milk for him, and he wiped his droopy, white mustache when it was gone.

The train stopped frequently and we were pulled onto the sidetracks, where we waited for hours. Once in awhile the door was slid open and the empty water pail was refilled and the overflowing toilet pail was emptied. At one of the stops, Mr. Jelinek was taken off the train, but he wasn't brought back when the train took off again. Rose cried for him. Later, she told us that Papa Jelinek was a well-known surgeon.

It was dusk when the train stopped once more. Magda pulled herself up to the window and said that she recognized the outskirts of Budapest. I thought how close we were to Grandmother, the other relatives and Tibor. I imagined if only there were a sudden air raid, maybe the policemen would abandon us and we could run for shelter. Then we could break out and within a half hour we could be at Aunt Irma's house. When the sirens started to wail like lovesick tomcats, I believed my wish was granted. The train rolled out quickly from the station and we were pulled onto a sidetrack. By the pale moonlight, the red bursts of anti-aircraft gunfire made the night crackle and

sparkle. The tracks trembled as the blast shook the boxcars.

Close to me, I heard a deep voice, "Let's pray for the innocent people of the city."

Who were the innocent people? It wasn't the government? While we were locked up and being carried on a deadly ride, the leaders of the Hungarian government cooperated with the Nazis. The rest of the population wasn't innocent either. They didn't demand to stop the atrocities. Nobody laid his body over our tracks to block the train. How about the children of the city? They were innocent. I reached over and touched Juli's chubby little legs. Juli was innocent. I'll pray for the children of the city. No, no, I will pray only for the Jews of the city, and may the city crumble and the people die in the rubble! What was I saying? Tibor was there. I felt ashamed. O, God, how could I have sunk this low in such a short time? I would have loved to blame my moral decline on the Nazis and the frame of mind they put into me, yet I knew I had a built-in moral guide to prevent me from being like they were.

After the bombing stopped, the policemen returned to their posts inside the boxcars, and slammed the doors shut. We settled down to sleep. In my daze, I heard a soft baritone humming the lovely tune, "Tell them, I adore the women of Pest, if you happen to pass by." I'm not the only one who was going crazy, I thought. The tune stopped abruptly as if someone had kicked the singer in the ribs.

As we sped along, a narrow strip of moonlight shone upon the schoolbook of human bodies. The people were sprawled in many strange positions. The moon saw many capital C's, L's and S's, but no capital I or T was among us.

I thought the first night at the Ghetto was the worst night in my life. Compared to this hellish ride, the Ghetto was a picnic.

The toilet pail was occupied continuously and to get there, one had to struggle through the twisted bodies. Painful shrieks and curses were underscored by the rattling of the wheels. A child cried, "Daddy, I want to go home." and the train picked up

the rhythm, “om, om, m.”

“I don’t want to die,” the wheels took up, “ie, ie. i.” “Don’t force me to live.” “iv, iv, v.” The wind hissed over the boxcars. “Shema Yisroel, oh, God, can’t you hear us” Then the rhythm changed.

“Hey, mister, move that goddamn buggy wheel off my stomach.” The seesaw nasal twang of someone snoring buzzed in the stuffy air. “Get off my ear.”

“I’m suffocating, move your ass out of my face.”

The screeching of the wheels scraped my eardrums. The rhythm continued, “God, goodGod, God, goodGod, Good!”

I stole myself into another world. My sleep was too short. I awoke in a sweat and had an urge to go to the pail. I stood up, but immediately, I was down again. There was no foot path on what seemed to be a kilometer-long obstacle course. I reached out with both hands and poked in the dark. There was no place to take a step. When I thought I had secured a spot for one foot, I discovered something like an arm beneath it. Then I stepped on someone’s chest. In desperation, I decided to grope ahead with my hands before putting down my feet again. Bending low, the strong body odors nauseated me. Another step and another outcry. “If this takes any longer, I will wet my panties,” I cried to myself. Finally, I reached the pail. Luckily, it was vacant. Then I had a problem balancing myself. Should I hold my panties, my dress, or my nose? I felt like an acrobat balancing on a high wire. By the time I finished, I was in tears. The way back as just as difficult. I stood swaying like a sapling tree in a windstorm, trying to reach for a steady object. I was too far from the wall. I stretched my arms some more. The train rocked and knocked me down. I landed on the top of arms, legs, necks and noses. The same shock had jolted the toilet pail. Those who slept close to it awoke screaming, spitting and fighting. Many didn’t even stir, they just lay there, sleeping peacefully in the stinking slush.

Slowly, the bodies around me changed positions. I finally had a spot for myself, and the train ... the train ... ain..."

I awoke in the middle of a dream, suffocating. A heavy thigh lay across my chest. Turning gently to pry it off as if it were a fallen log, I proceeded cautiously. Why should the owner awaken to reality just because I couldn't breathe? I slid my hands between the thigh and my chest and felt the moist body. Then I remembered my dream ...

It was a mild, sunny spring day, the snow was already melting. In a puddle I saw the reflection of waving flags. The lampposts were connected with garlands made of red, white and green ribbons of the national colors. From the distance I could hear a choir of the *Kurutz*, freedom fighters. I recognized them, although they had lived centuries before. They sang, "Farewell my country, I'm going into exile. Good-by beloved land ..." I remembered it was Freedom Day, my birthday. "Freedom is gone," I heard my brother, Emery, cry. The ribbons became darker and darker until they slid off the lampposts and turned into thick, black chains. The chains hummed an eerie tune, and landed on my chest, crushing me until I couldn't breathe anymore ... After awhile the human log slid off my chest and I was able to fall back to sleep.

In the morning the policemen opened the doors and the gush of air brought in some relief. I opened my eyes and noticed that my head rested on the arm of Magda Schwartz. "Your arm sure makes a fine pillow," I told her.

"You were lucky, my dear. I slept on Lena's bony ankle."

"Next time try to sleep on Magda's behind," Lena snapped back. "Now that is really a fine pillow."

"I slept on Grandfather's tummy, and he made a gurgling sound," Juli joined the conversation. It felt soothing to hear her sweet voice, as she had hardly spoken since we had gotten on the train.

"How did you sleep, Father?" I asked. Father looked straight ahead, his eyes icy,

his features hard. He didn't reply. The previous night surely was his Waterloo. He had been chained like a defeated warrior.

My darling Father, I'll never forgive the Nazis for making you into an ice statue. I held back my tears.

At breakfast time, most everyone had only crumbs of bread. It was different with us. Aunt Margit passed around a piece of ham and a lump of bread. Again, Grandfather refused. He made faces, and we thought he was trying again to avoid eating non-kosher food, but when he grabbed his stomach and let out a growl, we knew right away he wasn't fussing about the ham. With the help of Giza and Margit, he staggered up, and attempted to reach the pail. When he saw it was occupied, his features became distorted from agony.

"Let him pass, please, let him pass," Mother shouted.

The train jolted, and Grandfather fell. By the time he got up and reached the pail, it was already too late. He had lost control and defecated in his pants. His face turned red and he cursed loudly.

"Hold on, old man," said one of the policeman at the door. Grandfather tried to get back to his place and attempted to sit down. Raising his fists, he let out another volley of feverish curses between his teeth.

"Please, Papa, accidents could happen to anyone. You need not be ashamed," my father said.

Mother and I looked at each other. We were startled by his tone, which indicated that Father was showing interest in something other than his own pain and humiliation.

"I wish I had never given him that milk," Mother lamented. Hearing "milk," the pail holder said he was relieved. He feared Grandfather had the symptoms of a contagious disease, although he didn't say what sickness he could have had.

Mother and Margit cleaned up Grandfather.

“Pee you, Grandpa is a baby,” Juli snickered and pinched her nose with her fingers. Giza gave her an angry look and she stopped snickering, and hid her face in Lacko’s lap. Now the problem was, what to do with the soiled underpants. Lacko suggested we air mail it to the folks on the outside. It was a good idea. Mother folded the pants into a small bundle and squeezed it through the window bars.

“You should have attached a note saying, “This gift is from the Jews to the Nazis,” Lacko said. I wished we could have done just that, only we had no paper or pencil.

When Grandfather had another bellyache, the road toward the pail parted like a large zipper.

Father’s problem was the opposite. At home he could relieve himself only after a walk. He would go out for a walk even in the worst winter. Since there was no hope for walking in the boxcar, this worsened the problem. Mother advised that when the train stopped again, and someone was permitted to empty and refill the water pails, Father should volunteer to do the job.

We rode on for a couple of hours before the train stopped with an unusually loud screech. The two policemen jumped off and asked someone to bring down the filled toilet pail and the empty water pail. Father immediately grabbed the empty water pail and jumped off the train. A few minutes later he returned with a pail full of water. As he lifted up the pail to the floor and climbed in, his face was ashen. We suspected there was something terribly wrong with Father. He pursed his lips tightly and pointed at the German soldiers lurking on the tracks. I climbed up to the window and with horror I saw the name of the Hungarian border town. It was the last station before entering the German-occupied Czechoslovakia.

One of the Hungarian policemen returned and asked us for an interpreter. A middle-aged man volunteered and he joined the rest of the interpreters already lined

up between the tracks. The group was so close to our boxcar that we could hear clearly the speech of the German officer in charge.

Chapter 3

The German officer began his tirade with the customary swear track. His dialect differed from those we had heard back home. He also used a wider variety of curses. “Dog” was one of his favorite words. When the swearing part of his speech was finished, he said our lazy life was over. From now on, every Jew had to work hard, and we would die like dogs.

Grandfather was examining his callused hands. Excluding the religious holidays, he could count on the fingers of one of his hands the days he had not worked.

The speech continued. If anyone tried to escape, he would be shot like a dog.

“What does he have against dogs anyway?” Lena asked.

“Who knows,” Magda replied. “Maybe he was bitten by a rabid dog?”

The officer signed off with another barrage of curse words, that included the parts of the dog’s anatomy. Margit made heaving sounds as if she were ready to throw up. She had plenty of company.

The interpreters were dismissed, and returned to their boxcars. Ours translated what the German officer had said, omitting the obscenities.

“I wish I would have learned to play the piano instead,” I blurted out, forgetting it was Father’s idea that I study German beyond my school’s requirement. Mother, who had wanted me to take piano lessons, looked at me angrily and remarked that I should learn to control myself.

The Hungarian policemen returned. They lay five loaves of bread and a lump of margarine onto the floor. One of them said, “Now you Jewish Gypsies will learn to

appreciate how good of a life you had in Hungary,” and he slammed the door on us.

As we pulled out from the border station I climbed up to the window to view my country for the last time. I was tempted to say something sentimental, but came up only with bitter thoughts. As a child I was taught to love my country, to include it in my evening prayers, and pledge to die for it if need be. Now I must learn to *unlove* my country. I slumped down and like the Germans would say, I was licking my sore spot of my soul like a sick dog. Yet, if I allowed the Nazis to crush my spirit also, then they would have succeeded. I must be strong and deny their total victory over me.

An hour after entering the foreign territory a man, about fifty years old, collapsed and was dead within a minute. He lay peacefully on the floor, his face an expression of freedom. That could have been true. He was already beyond the grip of the Nazis. My eyes were drawn to his wife. She was holding unto his body, and sobbed softly. A young man, probably their son, stood up and chanted the *Kaddish*, the Jewish prayer of the mourners. “Glorified and sanctified ...,” he praised God. Nobody joined in, not even for the customary, “Amen.” I could see myself laying there on the floor, and gauging from the horrid looks and total silence, others could have had the same thoughts. Juli couldn’t grasp the meaning of a life leaving the body and Giza didn’t explain what had happened. Lacko was fully aware what death meant even though he hadn’t seen anyone dying before.

When the train stopped a teenage German soldier opened the door and climbed inside. He instructed us to get up off the floor and stand at attention each time he presented himself. He jumped out, and came back five minutes later, perhaps to test how well we obeyed. Then he saw the body on the floor.

“What the hell is the matter with that crazy, old Jew? Doesn’t he know he has to obey the command of a German?”

"My husband is dead," cried the woman.

"No, he is only pretending," the soldier said, and kicked the lifeless body. The woman kneeled down and gently stroked the spot where her husband received the kick.

"Dearest Max, they can't hurt you anymore."

The soldier left and moments later returned with Dr. Berren who examined the body and confirmed the death. The soldier grunted something unintelligible.

A young woman, in her advanced pregnancy, crawled over to Dr. Berren and whispered a few words to him. The doctor assured her that he would come to help her deliver the baby. The soldier motioned for the doctor to leave. Before stepping down to the tracks, Dr. Berren waved to us.

The soldier returned like an old sin.

"Within five minutes, I want you to hand over to me a man's wristwatch, a camera, a fountain pen and one hundred German Marks." The interpreter took it upon himself to be the spokesman for the group. He explained, that we no longer owned any of those items as they were taken away from us before we even left our home towns.

The soldier didn't believe him. Furiously, he tore open a couple of suitcases, near the door, and threw the contents over the huddled people around. Yet, he couldn't find anything of value. He left the boxcar and slammed the door with such force that it sprung back. Swearing, he closed it again.

In the company of the dead man, we had another awful night. Someone mistook the water pail for the toilet pail and used it.

On Friday morning, while the train was standing at a station with a strange-sounding name, Mr. Baras, from Feherwar, tagged the sleeve of his wife.

"It's about time you finished cleaning the bathroom. I want to take a bath." He

sounded very upset.

Mrs. Baras smiled. "I'm sorry, dear, I was too busy yesterday. I promise to do it today." She pretended for her husband's sake.

"Listen, Ester, I've had enough of your laziness. I am fed up with excuses. Get out of bed and clean the bathroom." He shouted so loudly that a soldier opened the door and stuck his head in.

"Shut up," shouted the soldier, "or do I have to come in and shove my fist down your throat?"

"Mind your own business," Mr. Baras shouted back. "This is a family matter."

The soldier raised his rifle. Mrs. Baras saw it coming and protectively, she leaned over her husband's body and took the blow. The soldier kept beating her. When Mrs. Baras lay motionless, he wiped the butt of his rifle on her skirt. Then he glanced around proudly, as if he had just received the Nobel Peace Prize.

"This is insane," I whispered to Mother. "How could a young punk already be conditioned to enjoy abusing an elderly couple?"

Mother wiped her tears silently.

As the train kept rolling and the boxcar heated up by our bodies being packed together, we began running out of water. Our family had conserved our ration for Juli and Lacko. A young couple with a crying infant sat next to Giza. The mother had little to eat or drink and her milk supply was dwindling.

"Why is the baby crying so much?" Juli wanted to know.

"She is very thirsty," Giza explained.

Juli understood. "Give her my water, Mommy," she said bravely. Giza opened her bottle and poured some water into a cup and handed it to the nursing mother. She drank it down with one gulp.

"I gave it to the baby, not to you," Juli complained sadly.

The woman smiled. "I have a pipe inside me," she pointed at her breast. "The water gets in there and turns into milk."

Juli frowned. "Let me see."

"I'll show you as soon as it happens."

Seeing Juli's generosity, other people shared their meager supply of food and water with the woman. When she was able to nurse she squirted a few drops of milk into Juli's hand.

Juli gazed at it jubilantly, then licked her hand and made faces.

"Mommy, did I drink this icky stuff?" Giza nodded.

"I'm glad I'm not a baby anymore," Juli said.

Later in the afternoon I felt cramps in my belly, and knew it was the onset of my period.

"I wish I were a boy," I whispered to Magda.

"Listen my sweet, sooner or later most of the women will face the same problem. There is no way we can maintain our feminine modesty. Don't worry about it."

Lacko was my main concern. Could I ask him not to look, but his attention was focused elsewhere. He was sharpening the wooden handle of his toothbrush on a strip of metal on the floor, saying, he wanted to mark the passing days on the wall.

In the heat of the boxcar the dead body started to smell. I really was uncertain whether it was actually decomposing or it was only in my mind. Apparently, other people had the same idea because soon many vomited, adding an extra odor to the already existing stench.

During the night when there was a merciful relief from the heat, we hoped to get some rest, only there was none. The young, pregnant woman went into labor. I never

imagined it took that much screaming to have a baby. The train was in motion, and everyone pounded on the walls, hoping to attract the attention of the soldiers, but it was useless.

A baby girl was born that early Saturday morning, in the darkness, without the help of Dr. Berren. Giza wrapped her in a towel. The new mother lay exhausted, yet she still retained the glow of joy on her face.

“Little baby, have a happy and fruitful life.” We wished her the best of everything. One dead man and one newly born was the eternal symbol of Judaism. “*Am Yisroel hei*,” the people of Israel live, I thought.

As the morning grew lighter, I climbed up to the window, and holding onto the bars, I tried to figure out the location of our trip. Geography had been one of my favorite subjects, but seeing a flat map and seeing the land for real was quite different. We rode over a bridge across a wide river and after crossing, the train tracks formed a semi-circle. I saw a long line of chained boxcars of compressed misery. I tried to catch the wind and hoped to fly away with it, but my face hit the wired bars. The sun was cooperating with our enemies; it beat down on the top and sides of our stuffy, portable jail, heating it up as if it were a rehearsal for the next station, Hell. The trees on both sides of the tracks had been given more right than we to survive. Even the useless weeds flourished freely. Aroused by the sound of the rattling train, a rabbit dashed by, turning back, perhaps wanting to see the end of the train. The end was out of view. It was embedded in the dark days of Jewish history.

The train, like a black power saw, slid forward, dividing the blue and green horizon. After the steam and the smoke of the engine dissolved behind us, the scenery regained its previous form. I wondered if any of us in the boxcar would ever be able to regain our previous form.

“Get off the window, and let someone else take a turn to breathe,” I heard a gruff

voice behind me. I took one last look at the outside world and slumped down into the community coffin.

"I wish I were a rabbit," I said to Lacko.

Around noon, Mother told us that just like everyone else in the boxcar, we had practically run out of food. Only a small portion of bread remained, and a piece of dark, bitter chocolate Ella had brought for us at her last visit. Mother advised we wait awhile, maybe we would be given some more bread.

"But I'm already hungry," Juli cried. Mother gave her and Lacko a piece of bread. I looked at them with hungry eyes.

"Try to take a nap, dear, that would make the time go faster," Margit suggested.

I closed my eyes and leaned against the wall. I must have fallen asleep, because Mother was tapping me on the shoulder.

"We have arrived," she said, in a weak voice.

The door of the boxcar opened, but nobody moved.

Mother opened her suitcase and took out two dresses and put them on. I was puzzled. It was hot enough wearing one dress, let alone three. She told me to do the same, that way the suitcases would be easier to carry. I didn't argue. She also insisted that I remove my sandals and put on my sturdy walking shoes. I was tying my shoelace when two men, dressed in striped, convict uniforms, rushed to our door.

"Everybody out," ordered a loud German voice. Nobody moved.

One of the convicts, with a strange, strong accent, explained in German that it was better to get off on our own than being forced. Some of the people obeyed. They picked up their suitcases, getting ready to step down to the train tracks, until they heard:

"Leave all your things in there," the convict shouted.

“They are porters,” Margit said. “They will help us out to carry our luggage.”

“Look for their number,” Giza shouted.

“Out, out,” another one ordered. It was my turn to jump. My legs were weak, yet it felt good to stretch in the open. Suddenly, a strong, bitter odor attacked my nose. I tried to orientate myself but the scene barred description, as if we were part of a steaming flow of lava after a volcanic eruption. The confusion was even worse than when we had first boarded the train. The noises, the commotion, the awful din. It must have been like this in biblical times when God confused all language. The convicts spoke several languages and dialects, while the German soldiers shouted their own orders, all at the same time we were busting our own vocal cords, trying to keep our families together.

“Mothers, hold onto your children, but young women, give your babies to their grandmothers,” we heard a friendly Hungarian voice say. I was baffled and wanted to ask him why they brought the Hungarian convicts this far. There were plenty of jails in Hungary. Mother grabbed for my hand and held on so tightly that her hand turned white beneath my grip. Father held me on my other side. We headed forward, as if a steam roller were at our heels. If we stopped, surely the machine would flatten us.

“Where are we, young man?” Mother asked in Hungarian.

“In Auschwitz,” he replied.

“Oh, my God!” She exhaled and forgot to inhale for a few seconds.

I didn’t know what frightened me more, the way Mother acted or the word, Auschwitz, which made her act so terrified. I had no chance to ponder any longer because my attention turned to the newly-arrived German women soldiers. With the help of the armed soldiers, they made us line up between the tracks five abreast. Margit moved into our line holding onto Lacko. He was pushed from behind and almost wound up in a different row. Grandfather, Giza, Juli and the Schwartz sisters were following us.

A new order came. Men had to separate from women. Father grabbed for Lacko's hand, but Margit wouldn't let go until a woman soldier tore him away. Grandfather was pushed out of line and Father fought his way back to look for him.

"Wait, I'm coming with you," I cried and rushed back with him. Grandfather was sitting on a blanket among other elderly people. His huge body was spread out and he looked like a wounded giant, crushed as if he suddenly had become one hundred years old. He wanted to get up and join Father, but a woman soldier, half his size, knocked him down.

"How dare you," I shouted. The woman soldier turned and shoved me into a line of strangers.

"See you later, Grandpapa." I struggled back to Mother.

Not seeing Grandfather any longer, Juli cried out for him. She was screaming so pitifully that Giza was unable to soothe her. Mother remembered the piece of chocolate. She opened her purse and gave Juli some, and handed a piece to me. The chocolate melted in my hand.

For a moment I lost sight of Father, then I saw him holding the hands of Lacko and Marton Szabo. His unshaven face was dark and somber. He walked like a beggar who had lost his last coin. Mr. Unger walked right behind them with his brother and Mikki. They headed toward a different direction than the women.

The lines were forcibly directed toward a tall, well-groomed officer with dark hair and dark eyes. Although he stood on the same ground level as the rest, there was such an arrogance in his features, that it made him appear as if he were standing on a mound. He held a pair of brown leather gloves in his hand. I found that unusual for a hot June day. It turned out that the gloves had a power of their own.

Our line reached the judge-like figure and the gloves indicated the way we were to head.

Still holding firmly to Mother's hand, I was together with Giza, Juli and Margit. The gloves told us all to go to the left.

We had only walked a few steps when the officer called me back, and pointed for me to go to the opposite direction.

"I'm going with my mother," I told him bluntly.

"How old are you?" the officer's gruff voice hit me.

God knows why I added two years to my life, and he motioned again for me to go to the right side. I ignored him. One of the many women soldiers, who encircled him like an adoring entourage, grabbed me by my dress, pulled me hard, and shoved me so violently that I landed in Magda's arms.

"Nobody disobeys the Herr Doktor," the woman roared.

"Oh, my dear," Magda said gently, and guided me in the turmoil. Her sister, Lena, clung to her other side. Edit and Lilla held onto each other and waved toward their mothers, who were sent to the left side with my mother.

"I'm so glad that my mother is going with yours," Lilla said to me. "At least she will be with someone she knows." Then she added, "I saw Marton with your father and Lacko. He won't be lonely either."

As the shuffling continued, I turned my head back toward Mother. She was standing and waving at me.

"I'm coming to you!" I screamed, and tried to fight my way to the other side, but the force of the crowd made me go forward against my will. I walked with my head turned backward, my eyes focused on Mother. There was so much love, so much hope and encouragement in her eyes, that I took a mental picture of this last image. Then I lost sight of her.

I was bedazzled and confused. The chocolate in my hand was melting and I had no place to wipe it clean. I felt crushed and small between the tall wire fences, the

mean-looking guardhouses overhead and the mob. Magda practically led me as if I were a toddler. The sounds around me twirled like a threshing machine with a bad engine. As if walking in a fog, I could see only outlines and weak images. Mad pushing and shoving continued as others, too, realized they were separated from their loved ones. The lines moved slowly. Women walked on their tiptoes to be able to see further back. Many were getting out of the lines and their eyes followed the drifting mass of people, heading toward the direction known only to the Germans. Even middle-aged women cried for their families. Gradually I began to hear individual sentences.

“Look at those baldheaded women.” I recognized my friend Eta’s voice. Then her sister Clara’s face came into focus.

“They must have committed something awful to be punished like this,” Clara exclaimed. I saw her more clearly. Edit had braided her long hair sometime during our train ride, I didn’t know when, and now she caressed her hair protectively.

Lilla said we should be extra careful to keep our hair clean.

“Yes, yes,” said Eta’s Aunt Luci. She was holding onto her niece Anci’s arm. I saw Victoria and her cousin Regina. Mrs. Lazar, a neighbor of Aunt Margit and Sarah Spillman, a classmate of Miss Farkas, were there too, and many others from our Ghetto. Each woman was trying to stick close to her family. We were passing through fences, the prisoners on the other side going about, what appeared to be, their routine lives.

Our group was herded into a large brick building. The windows near the ceiling were covered with wires. The spacious room filled up fast. In my estimation, we could have been close to five hundred. The doors were locked behind us. I never have had claustrophobia, but now I felt as if I were one card pressed in the middle of a deck.

“We are going to be gassed her,” Mrs. Lazar moaned. Margit used to call her a doomsday forecaster. Quickly, I ran my eyes over the walls and the ceiling, but couldn’t

see any pipes leading into the room. I only saw a narrow side door from which a group of armed male and female soldiers poured in.

“We are going to be shot,” Mrs. Lazar cried out.

“Keep your thoughts to yourself, you old fool,” Victoria shushed her down. We gaped at Victoria with scorn for committing a hideous crime of disrespect.

One woman soldier stopped in front of the crowd and asked if any of us could speak German. Several women in the front row stepped forward. Through these interpreters we were told to disrobe and leave all our belongings on the floor.

Nobody moved.

The male soldiers were standing at the wall, conversing casually with each other.

“Let’s get going,” the woman soldier yelled loudly. “Take off your clothes.” We gazed at each other and gazed at the soldiers. They were still standing there, and none of us obeyed the order to disrobe. The woman soldier motioned to the male soldiers, and they were anxious to carry out her orders. Their action needed no interpretation. They affixed their bayonets, and after ripping off several dresses, everybody obeyed promptly. The dresses fell with various speeds. I peeled one dress after the other. They lay on the concrete floor like wrinkled wrappings from a package. I took off my slip and bra quickly, but when it came to removing my panties I hesitated.

“Off, off, everything must come off,” the soldiers shouted. I removed my panties and tossed them on the top of the clothes pile, too embarrassed to look around. The only naked women I had ever seen were painted on canvas. This gross nudity overwhelmed me. In the confusion, despite myself, my eyes focused on Mrs. Lazar. Her breasts were floppy like overripe figs and hung down to her navel. She had a scar on her belly, possibly because of some surgery. The veins of her legs were thick and blue, like rivers on the map, ready to pop out of their fleshy banks. I closed my eyes and wondered who was looking at my mother’s naked body. The thought was

maddening.

“Hold on, child,” Magda told me. Hesitantly, I glanced at her large, well-shaped breasts and told her I was trying to be strong.

The pile of clothing grew higher.

“Keep your shoes,” was the next order. I bent down, tossed my clothing aside and grabbed hold of my shoes. Everybody was bending down. I pretended I was blind, but the smell of unwashed bodies reminded me where I was.

The interpreters told us to line up and walk into the corridor that led out of doors. I was quick to follow orders, but some heavysset elderly women weren't able to proceed so fast, and they received an extra jab from the points of the bayonets. We were urged to move even faster. I was practically running, when a woman soldier called me back. She had a stick in her hand. I feared that she was going to hit me and I raised my hands to protect my face.

“Off, off with that.” With the stick she pulled the belt that held my sanitary napkin.

“Oh, God,” I turned to Edit. She shrugged her suntanned shoulders. Her small breasts barely moved.

“Off with it,” shrieked the German beast. I unbuttoned the belt and removed the napkin. She pointed at a pile of soiled sanitary napkins, near the wall. I tossed away my napkin. The soldier urged me to get back into the line. I was anxious to find Magda. As I fought my way back, I slipped on a trail of blood that had been trickling down a woman's legs a few lines ahead. Another woman soldier came over. She handed me a towel and motioned to wipe up the trail. I tore the towel into three pieces. I stashed one piece of towel between my legs and tried to hold it tightly. I handed over the second piece to Eta in the next line and asked her to forward it to the woman who had made the trail. With the third one I wiped the floor, but didn't know what to do with the towel.

Lena kicked a shoe toward me. I hid the soiled rag inside the shoe's nose.

Confused and humiliated, we walked between rows of soldiers.

"May your eyes be covered with trachoma," Mrs. Lazar cursed at the soldiers.

We walked through another corridor until we reached a lineup of women sitting on backless chairs, holding hair clippers in their hands. Everyone had short, clipped hair and I figured maybe we were going to get the same style of haircuts. Magda was the first to walk up to the line. With one swift motion of her hand, the woman barber whizzed across the center of Magda's hair. Lena shrieked. The second cut raced across from ear-to-ear, leaving two bare dividing paths on Magda's thick hair. The barber proceeded to shear Magda's head. When Magda touched her bald head and let out a cry, a soldier kicked her in the leg. Magda moved on. The shearing of heads continued until it was Edit's turn. She fought fiercely. Two women soldiers forced her to stand still. Her lustrous black hair glided down the floor like a sail of a dark ship at sundown on a lonely harbor, completing its mission of grace and beauty.

Soon I, too, was pushed under the clipper. When I touched my head I said, "I became a billiard ball." Everybody near me laughed, but Edit. She put her hands over her chest, and her face became pale.

"Oh, my God," she cried, "you look just like your dear brother Emery." She embraced me and her warm tears fell on my shoulder.

Magda turned to her sister. "Come to think of it you resemble our Joseph," she said sadly, and explained to Lilla about their deceased brother.

After Mrs. Lazar received her haircut, the shape of her head was so comical, it looked like a bashed-in soccer ball. We laughed at her. Deeply insulted, she walked away from us and joined a group from Feherwar.

While the reactions to the haircuts changed, the expression on the faces of the women barbers did not. They worked as if they were shearing sheep.

From the haircutting corridor we were led into another corridor where we got shaved under our arms. Magda was ticklish and wiggled until a scrawny woman soldier slapped her on the buttock. Then she stood still.

From there we were directed into a large hall which had been divided by a tall wire fence into two portions. On the higher level, more women barbers were sitting, while on the lower level, men in striped suits stood before a row of brick ovens, similar to those the bakers used back home. The place smelled of burning hair.

Eta's Aunt Luci said it smelled like burned roast.

"These are crematoriums," a tall, bony woman behind Luci remarked. "Instead of burying the dead people, they burn them."

"There must be lots of sick and old people around here," Anci said.

I was thinking of Grandfather, how terrible he looked as he lay on the blanket, near the railroad tracks.

No, no, he was still a healthy, vigorous man. The Germans surely could see his strong muscles and utilize his skill in a butcher shop. With so many people to feed, there had to be a butcher shop.

We lined up in front of the women barbers and were told to spread our legs. At the same time, the men in striped suits strolled up to the fence and chatted with the barbers as if they were well acquainted.

When it was my turn, the woman barber, I guessed to be no more than fifteen years old, shouted:

"Spread it!" Her German had a strange accent. She put the cold clipper to my body. I jumped, and lost the soiled towel piece I had been hiding, and I bloodied up the clipper. I was in a flame of shame, but it didn't bother the little barber. She kept up the conversation with a red-faced, young convict without a wince. They talked in a language similar to German. Someone behind us said they spoke Yiddish. After the

barber was through shaving me she motioned with the bloody clipper, "Next."

I thought if I ever got out of there, I would become tough as the sole of my shoes, and thinking of them, I held unto my shoes tightly. They were my close companions, the only connecting links to my home.

Next, we were led into a shower room. This was the only pleasant thing to happen to our bodies since leaving home. Although we had no soap, the flow of warm water revitalized our tired and abused bodies. At the exit, we were sprayed with lice killer under our arms and between our legs. That smarted. In the adjoining hall, those in need received paper sanitary napkins, without belts to hold them.

At the next stop we had to dip our shoes into a pool of disinfectant and were told to put them on our feet. We made suspicious sounds as we sloshed about which made some of us even smile.

"I'm afraid, I'll never find my way back to our clother," Lilla remarked. She didn't have to. We were lined up by a long counter and were given a dress and a pair of panties. My dress was so large that I could have had Eta and Clara move in with me. It reached down to my ankles, and the hem was torn on the back. Hardly anyone received a fitting dress. Mine was the most rediculously shaped. I had no luck with the painties either. It was ten sizes larger than I and the elastic band was broken. I had to hold it up.

....."Those women behind the counter are playing a miss-match game," I said. That could have been true as they watched us getting dressed and snickered continuously, while making remarks few of us could understand. Once out of the building I tore two strips off the bottom of my dress and used one to keep up my panties. The other strip I pulled through the loop of the sanitary napkin and tied that around my waist.

We were moved out of the yard. After walking five minutes we reached a gate, topped by a sign, "B III." Inside the new yard we saw rows and rows of wooden

barracks. Without them, the place would have been barren like a desert. The women soldiers chased us up to Barrack 7 and pushed us inside.

The barrack was divided into two large rooms, one of which was already filled with baldheaded, ill-clad women. As soon as everyone was inside, we were ordered to line up five abreast, near the wall, and to face the windows.

My thoughts whirled in my head as I waited for more instructions. I couldn't adjust to the rapidly moving, insane events. My body became a part of an obedient mass. I wondered how long it would take until my mind would also be regimented.

We heard a sharp whistle blow and a group of women soldiers marched in, sure of themselves, holding their heads up high as if they were on a parade.

"Time for *Zahlappell*" a bony-faced, redhead shouted. Zahlappell must have meant counting, because she pranced down in front of the lines, counting each bald head as if we were heads of cabbage. A short, ugly woman soldier assisted her. One walked from front to back, the other from back to front. Six hundred ten was the final count.

The soldiers left the room and a tall, blond civilian with wide hips, walked in. Dressed neatly, wearing a freshly-pressed apron, she held a whip. With the aid of an interpreter she explained that each time a German woman soldier, she called *Aufseherin* would enter, we had to rise and stand at attention. She made us practice several times. She said her name was Genya. She was going to be our "Block Alteste," the oldest, or so-called leader of the barrack, although she could not have been more than twenty years old. She warned us to obey her as much as we obeyed the Germans. While she talked, she flicked the whip continuously, indicating what would happen to us if we disobeyed.

"Dog obedience training," Victoria whispered.

Genya marched back and forth in front of the line, then peeked out the window, as

if to make sure that there were no Aufseherinnen nearby. Then she returned to our line, put her hands on her hips, drew herself up and started her harangue.

“Lousy Hungarians,” she roared in Hungarian with only a slight accent. “You stayed for years in your cozy, feather-lined houses, living a happy life while us Slovak, Pole, German and other Jews were rotting away in the death camps. Now it is your turn to rot away, you dirty dogs!” She twirled her whip, and with each revolution she spat out swear words. The longer she talked the louder and more violent she became. By the time she was finished she was screaming in frenzy.

Two short, bowlegged, young women wobbled in. Each of them carried a whip.

“Junior dog trainers,” Victoria was heard saying.

Genya and her two companions left the room and we relaxed for a moment. I was about to make a comment about Genya’s behavior, when the three of them returned. They checked our lines to make sure we were standing at attention properly, chin up, chest forward, belly in, feet together, just like soldiers. They left and returned several times, repeating the same routine. Those who didn’t stand properly were whipped. I began thinking about telling Father how fast I learned to stand at attention. During our early years Father tried to make soldiers out of us. He taught us to stand at attention, and we had to exercise in front of an open window, every morning, regardless of the weather. Emery was good at it, but I could never master the attention part. Now I could tell Father that I did.

When Genya and her helpers failed to return, we sat down on the clean, wooden floor, and faced the door heedfully, just in case the game was still on and Genya would surprise us and punish us for not standing at attention. After awhile we became bolder and started to converse with one another.

Lena remarked that Genya, probably a Slovakian, must have been a lunatic to talk to us like that. “There was no way we could help her people any more than the Russian

Jews could have prevented our deportation.”

“Oh, they are only barking dogs and barking dogs seldom bite,” Magda tried to lighten the conversation.

Lilla said she wasn’t going to find out if they could bite.

“I hope our families receive a better treatment than we,” I said. When I said, “families,” Sarah began to cry.

Chapter 4

We sat silently, waiting, guessing and hoping. I wished there were someone to ask how long we were going to stay there, but nobody among us knew the answer.

After awhile Regina said she had seen tattooed numbers on Genya and her helpers' arms.

"Maybe we are waiting to be tattooed," Magda remarked with a frown. Edit said if we got tattooed she would stand at the village square and charge people to view her numbers.

"Village square, home, how far they seem," Eta said, and sighed. We sighed with her.

"I have to go. Where are the pails?" Lilla stood up and doing tiny steps, she squeezed her thighs together. "Ou, ou," she cried.

Two women climbed in through the windows and wanted to know if any of us were from the city of Gyor. Lilla asked one of them if she knew where she could relieve herself.

"Jump out the window and there you are," she was told.

"What if the beasts return while I'm outside?" Lilla worried until she saw others doing it.

"I'll go with you," I said and we ran to the window, but couldn't see any pails, only a row of large, wooden crates. We climbed out to try out those "new style" toilets. Walking by the fences, the guards ignored us as we squatted over the boxes.

"If I get home, I'd invite the neighbors each time I had to pee. I wouldn't know how

to do it without an audience,” Lilla said.

We climbed back through the open windows. I gazed at myself in the glass and said, “Yack.” My head was pale and shiny, and my body was lost in the huge gown.

“It will grow back soon,” Lilla comforted me.

We sat down again. I felt so hungry that I could hear my stomach growl. I visualized a variety of food, such as sweet corn, cabbage, noodles, cinnamon buns, figs and other things I refused to eat at home. Now I would eat any of them gladly. No kitchen facilities were visible. I thought perhaps they were in a different building.

Suddenly, Genya appeared. We jumped up obediently, waiting for more plagues to hit us, but she only wanted two women to help her carry in the tea.

Believing dinner was going to be served, I was overcome with happy anticipation. The women carried in a tall can similar to those the dairy farmer used to transport milk to the market, only it was much larger.

Genya made us stand at attention and let us wait for some time, before she allowed her bowlegged helpers to remove the lid from the can. After the can was opened, the helpers left and returned with a dozen beat-up pots and pans and a rusty ladle. One helper filled a pot with tea and carried it to the first person at the first line, near the door.

“Take only five swallows, you dog,” Genya shrieked. The woman took only one sip; her face turned red. She puckered her lips and looked for a place to spit. Finding none, she swallowed it. She wrinkled her nose, made gasping sounds and held her hands to her abdomen. Refusing to take another sip, she handed the pot to the woman standing behind her. The second woman had similar expressions after the first sip and handed the pot quickly to the third woman, and fourth and fifth. None of the women drank her allotted five swallows; instead, she handed the pot over to the next row. When the pot reached me, I tried to figure out a spot on the rim, where no one had

drank before. Sarah snickered. I took one sip and since there was no place for me to spit, I swallowed the foul smelling, bitter-tasting, lukewarm liquid, wondering why it was called "tea."

"This has to be poison and they are trying to kill us," Edit expressed my fear to Regina.

"If they wanted to kill us, they wouldn't have gone through the trouble to shave, shower and disinfect us," Regina explained.

That made some sense, though from our previous experience with the Germans, nothing could be taken for granted. I handed the pot to Lena. She took one swallow, then another and another. We stared at her as if she were a mad masochist. When the pot reached Victoria, she burst out with rage. "God damn it, do they think I'm a pig?"

"Hold your voice, dear, or you'll get acquainted with the whip," Regina said softly.

"Six hundred and ten women drinking from one dozen pots," Eta cried. "it nauseates me."

The pots were returned after all the women had used them. The can was still half-filled because most of the women refused to drink the second sip of tea. We patiently waited for the rest of the dinner, but it didn't come. It was getting dark. There was no sign of electricity anywhere inside the room. The only light emanated from the searchlights of the watchtowers.

Genya warned us not to go out in case of an air raid, or we would be shot like dogs. So she, too, had learned from the German manual how to talk to Jews. However, when she said the words, it hurt twice as much because she was another Jew. I remembered the closing line from a poem by Maurice Rosenfeld. "There is no pain which hurts as much as the ones afflicted by one's brethren."

Genya warned that in case we thought of escaping, we should know the fences

were charged with high voltage electricity. We could try though, only it was an ugly way to die. She described in gory details the final appearance of her beloved cousin, Rifka, after attempting to climb the fence. As she spoke, Genya's body shook and her face twitched.

More orders: In the morning, we were to rise at the first blow of the whistle, and at the second, line up for Zahlappell outside the barracks near the wall. Those who failed to stand at attention at the third blow, were going to be punished like dogs.

When it turned completely dark that night, we realized that we weren't going to be reunited with our families. We prepared ourselves for sleeping, again laying like a crazy alphabet, more on each other than on the floor. I remembered what Lena had told me on the train about Magda's soft behind, and I asked her if I could use her as my pillow. At first, she hesitated. Only when the struggle for a sleeping spot intensified, did Magda agree. We lay beneath a window to get some air. This meant that each time anyone had to use the toilet boxes, either she stepped on us, or we had to get up and move out of the way.

I was hungry and frightened. The bitter smell of my surroundings settled into my chest. I tried to compare the worst nights of my life — in the synagogue, in the Ghetto, on the train — but this night was the winner. All the other nights I had my family to give me comfort. I thought of my mother and made a resolution that if I got out in one piece, I would always obey her. I also vowed never to refuse eating any food she would place before me. I cried and wetted Magda's buttock, and she put her arm around me.

"Try to get some rest, my child," she said, affectionately. This gave me some comfort. How would I ever be able to repay her for these gentle, soothing words?

The shrill of the whistle awoke me. At first I was dumbfounded. Once I dared to open my eyes, I jumped up and hurried out the window in fear of punishment. Everybody was rushing to get in line, yet according to Genya we were slow like lazy

dogs. She threatened to teach us a lesson after Zahlappell. The redheaded Aufseherin counted us and after she left, Genya ordered us to kneel and stay so until she allowed us to get up.

We kneeled down and waited. The sun was barely up. It was so cold that we shivered. I tried to find a reason why they made us rise at this early hour. In a way of encouragement Magda said she had dreamed we shortly would be out of our predicament. Nobody believed in dreams, only reality mattered. And our reality was bleak.

Edit came up with the notion that we would be taken to work. Lilla said maybe we would be taken to our families. I had no idea of my own. My knees were hurting. Tiny bits of gravel settled into my skin. I kept watching the sunrise, not as if I was anxious to see the scenery, it just gave me something to do.

I noticed the toilet boxes were leaking and their contents were draining toward us. We didn't dare move out of the way.

Mrs. Veres, the owner of a hat shop I used to know from Fehervar, got up from the slushy ground. Genya noticed and said that no one was permitted to stand up without her permission.

Mrs. Veres exclaimed, she was sure Genya had no mother. It was her misfortune that Genya heard her remark, and retaliated quickly. She charged to the lines like an angry beast.

"I did have a mother," she cried. "I saw her dying during Zahlappell. They forbade me to step out and help her." Genya growled like a wounded bear, and whipped Mrs. Veres across her face. The whip sliced into her flesh like a sharp knife, and blood spouted over her whole face, neck and dress. Terra and Joli, kneeling behind their mother, jumped up and attacked Genya with their fists. They pounded on her as if they were puffing up a pillow. The Aufseherinen stood by, laughing at the Jews fighting

among themselves.

When the fight was over Genya declared that those who dared lay a hand on her, wouldn't be allowed to receive their food for a whole week. Then she retreated, avoiding the faces of the grinning Aufseherinnen.

Now I was glad that my mother wasn't with me. Surely I would lose my temper if anybody acted disrespectfully toward her.

With Genya's permission the sun rose higher, and when it became completely daylight we saw how terribly Mrs. Veres had been hurt. Joli and Terra in whisper, asked those who were close to them if there was a doctor among the women. Everyone was afraid to make a sound. Mrs. Veres was kneeling in the toilet slush, and the blood trickled down her face.

The tea can was brought, and we were permitted to stand up. My knees were sore and I picked the small pebbles out of my skin.

The breakfast tea was served the same way as on the previous night, except the helpers no longer carried the filled pots to the lines. They stood by the cans and took turns dishing out the steaming brew. Each person was permitted to take ten swallows. Now I could spit out the first sip I took. Lena saw me and said:

"Don't do that. Think of your family. For each member take one swallow, that way you have something in your stomach."

I went through ten members of my family, taking a swallow after each name; then I threw up the whole thing. The bowl was empty. It was my turn to carry it back to the can, and wait for the helpers to ladle in more tea for the next line of women. I was still shaking when I bent down to hold the bowl in front of the can.

"Hold it steady, you mangy dog," the helper shouted. I tried to steady myself, but not enough to her liking. She took the first ladle full of hot tea and spilled it on my hand.

I ground my teeth to keep myself from screaming, and robbed her of the pleasure

of seeing me suffer. I carried back the tea and handed it to Eta in the next row. She looked at my hand with horror, but there was nothing she or anyone else could do.

“We must beware of these tigresses,” Eta whispered.

After the miserable breakfast we rushed to the toilet boxes. The lineup was long and before I got a chance to relieve myself, the whistle blew again, and like an obedient dog, I ran to the side of the barrack.

Genya counted us again and said we were about to go for a walk. A dim hope rose in my mind that perhaps we were going to be united with our families. The march lasted only a couple of minutes. Still far from the gate, we were led up onto a road and made to halt in front of a large machine gun which stood on a mount. Genya shouted, “Turn around, face the gun, and no matter what happens, don’t make any sound.”

Mesmerized by fear, I stood motionless, watching the shadows move. My hand smarted from my burn and the sun beat mercilessly on my bald head. I wondered what a sunstroke was like.

Sarah was the first one to collapse in the dust. I bent down, wanting to help her, but Edit shook her head. I understood. There was nothing I could do for Sarah, and I surely could get myself into trouble. I straightened up. Shortly after, several other women collapsed, perhaps from sunstroke, hunger, or just from sight of the gaping machine gun.

I forced myself to think of other subjects beside fear, hunger, pain and heat. Grandmother used to say, “If you are in a hot, dry desert, think of an oasis.” Dear Grandmother, how would she know about a desert or an oasis? I could pretend to be elsewhere. Now I am at the French Riviera getting a gorgeous suntan. I’m feeling the sea breeze and waiting for a midday meal of roast duck. Instead, the breeze brought the stench of the ever-smoking chimneys and I was roasting in my own sweat.

I had to control the urge to urinate. I recalled old Mrs. Kohen, my grandparents’

neighbor. Her long, white underwear with the open crotch used to dry on the clothes line. She spread her legs and urinated standing up. How could I do it with my closed panties that had tight elastic bands around my legs, and how badly would I be punished if I were caught?

The guards and the Aufseherinen took turns standing in the shade of the barracks, and they were replaced frequently. Genya didn't show her hateful face until the sun started its descent. She ordered us to walk back to the barrack. It felt good to move after such a long, grueling stance.

Not all of us could walk. Those who had fainted, were dragged along to the side of the barrack. We were told to get inside and stand in line for Zahlappell again.

"What the hell for?" Victoria mumbled, "Not a damn soul could have escaped."

Large cans were brought in and we stood in line for dinner, which was green soup with a medicine taste. None of us had the courage to swallow this peculiar looking slop. The pots were passed from one line to the other, and from one set of lips to the other, without the soup diminishing in volume. Genya watched us. She said if we didn't eat the soup that night, it would be served for breakfast.

A few brave souls tried it again, making faces as if they were eating gall from the chicken liver. Lena took ten swallows and urged us to follow her example.

I made up my mind that I would stay alive. I'd pretend to be a cow, I said, and encouraged my friends to do the same, because if cows don't die from eating weeds and grass, neither would we. Victoria said I was an idiot. The others watched me as I tackled the first swallow. With the second swallow I felt something hard in my mouth. I took it out and placed it on the top of my right index finger. "Is it a ladybug?" I said. "What shall I do with it?"

Edit asked if it was alive or dead. I said it was dead.

"Well, in that case, you should give her a decent burial."

“Are you serious?” Victoria asked.

I turned to Edit and nodded.

“You’re crazy,” Victoria said.

I ingested the rest of my ten allotted swallows of the warm garbage, made faces, stopped myself from throwing up— and lived.

After the pails were dragged away we ran to the toilet boxes. While the others returned, Lilla, Edit, Lena and I stayed outside. The rest looked on from the window as we buried the ladybug ceremoniously. Lena composed a short sermon, praising the ladybug’s virtues, then we covered it with earth and patted it down. I placed a tiny flat pebble over the grave for a tombstone.

“May you travel to ladybug’s heaven, wherever that might be,” I said, and my friends replied, “Amen.”

As night approached, our hopes of seeing our family departed. The second night was worse than the first one, because now we suffered from sunburn. Thinking we were smart, we lay near one of the walls and got squeezed against it all night. Sarah moaned pitifully. No sooner did I fall asleep then the whistle blew, and we were out again before sunrise.

“This place has a peculiar climate,” Eta said. “We freeze in the morning and melt during the day.” Her sister Clara shivered. Her teeth chattered loudly enough for us to hear.

The Zahlappell went faster this day. Genya didn’t keep her promise of serving us the leftovers, instead, we were given tea. I drank my five swallows bravely. Lena patted me on the back. We were dismissed after breakfast and sat by the side of the barrack, waiting for the skies to fall. After awhile I became bored and asked if anyone cared to join me and explore the terrain. Lena said she was in a such a pain that she would rather do something to keep her mind busy, and she was willing to accompany me.

Edit warned us not to venture too far, just in case we would be called to return to our families. I reasoned that Genya wouldn't do it without a Zahlappell and if the count was two short, she would yell so loud it could be heard all the way to Budapest.

Lena and I left the group. First, we walked near the fence, playing with danger, like children who put their finger over a candle, but not going as far as touching the flame. The guard hollered from the other side for us to get going. We moved on.

"This place is so barren that even the weeds refuse to grow," Lena remarked.

"It would be nice to have trees, or better yet, bushes. We could use the leaves for toilet paper," I said.

"Could they have any water pumps around here? I'm so terribly thirsty," Lena asked.

We kept on walking until we reached barrack No. 11. We peeked inside.

"Do you suppose they are Hungarian?" Lena asked.

We had no chance to find out. Their Block Alteste saw us and chased us away.

"How does she know we aren't one of hers?"

"It is our heads, these women must have arrived only recently. Their heads are still white." I shared my observation.

"I wish you hadn't said 'head,'" Lena cried. "My scalp is on fire."

We walked on.

At the side of a smaller barrack, we smelled medicine. Nurses walked by, and I was thinking to ask for some ointment for my blistered hand. A ruddy-faced Aufseherin saw me approaching a nurse and chased me away.

"This is getting so bad that anyone can order us around as if we were children."

"Even if a broomstick would say, 'move,' I would obey," Lena mused with a slight grin.

Further down we were chased away from many other places and decided to head

back to our barrack.

Lena asked if anything had happened since we left.

Victoria replied, "What did you expect to happen? Yes, the war has ended. We are going home, but we had to wait for you, dumb heads."

Regina jumped up and stood in front of Victoria, forming a protecting shield, in case Lena and I retaliated for her snappy remark.

"Forget it," Lena said, "It is too hot to argue."

The whistle blew. Again, we were ordered in line and to walk up to the road leading toward the gate. Again, our hopes had risen to be reunited with our families. Again, we were disappointed. As soon as everybody was upon the road, Genya ordered us to take off our dresses, panties and shoes, and carry them over our heads.

The rest of our bodies will match our heads," Magda moaned. Soon, armed soldiers approached the lines and to add more variety to the scene, they were accompanied by police dogs indoctrinated in anti-Semitism. By command, the dogs attacked anybody who stepped out of the lines. The dogs and their masters were busy because it was difficult for us to walk barefoot on the hot pebbles.

"This must be dog feeding time," Sarah moaned. We were ordered to march forward, and stop in front of the Herr Doktor.

The long rows of nude women reminded me of a beauty contest. "Walk up, stop! Turn around, stop! Spread your toes, stop! Walk away! Next!"

"What, no music?" I remarked.

"You, idiot," Victoria said and she moved forward quickly to avoid my reaction.

I was more accustomed to nude bodies and dared to look around. As far as I could make out, Edit had the best figure. She was tall and slim, with a narrow waist, small, round breasts and long, shapely legs. She carried herself proudly even under such humiliating circumstances. In my opinion she would deserve the prize of "Miss

Birkenau.” The soldiers ignored her beauty. Well, at least they didn’t mock those who were less shapely.

Many women looked awful without their supporting garments. Saggy breasts, puffy bellies, bony hips, crooked legs and varicose veins were common. The skin of the old women hung like pleated skirts before ironing. They, too, marched with dignity. Of course, there were just as many well-shaped women in the crowd. I thought of my mother. I had never seen her naked. How would she feel marching in front of a crowd?

The line moved too slowly for the liking of Herr Doktor. He instructed his soldiers to urge the dogs to speed up things. One dog, with big, white fangs, growled at the heavysset, elderly Mrs. Lowi, a beautician from the suburb of Fehervar. To distract the charging animal, her daughter-in-law, Lullu, protectively jumped in front of her and kicked away the dog. The furious animal focused his attention on Lullu and after he was called off, she had to be carried away to the hospital barrack. I saw myself in Lullu’s position. Mrs. Lowi cried so loudly, that Genya warned if she didn’t shut up, she, too, would wind up in the hospital. To accent her words, Genya kicked Mrs. Lowi’s buttock. It wasn’t hard to guess what was going on in each other’s mind. The pain of watching others suffer was etched on their faces. It was a real relief when we were ordered back to the barrack. We weren’t permitted to go inside right away as there were two women washing the floor. We drooled while the women splashed the precious water over the floor.

“There must be water some place around here. Does anyone care to come with me to investigate?” I risked the question.

“It is a sin to waste water in front of these many thirsty persons,” Sarah said. “I’m willing to go with you.” She reached for my hand.

Chapter 5

“Keep out of trouble,” Edit voiced her concern.

Sarah smiled. She seldom talked. Being a member of a large religious family had taught her the benefits of staying out of quarrels. Her father was one of the wealthiest wine exporters in our village. Of her entire family, Sarah was the only one who came to this side. I felt she, too, had to be lonely and reached out for her hand.

I suggested we explore the opposite direction Lena and I had been. Soon, stashed away behind a dirty barrack, we discovered a strange mountain made of used pots and pans. Sarah stopped and opened her eyes widely.

“We could take some of these back with us,” she exclaimed.

“I don’t think we should. The owner of this mountain will come and punish us.”

“But there are so many, surely no one would miss any if we took a few.”

“You mean steal some?”

“Why not? The Nazis stole everything from us. It would be nice not having to drink after Mrs. Blum. You know she has tuberculosis.”

“How could we wash the pots after each time we eat?” I asked. Sarah had a slight smile on her face.

“What makes you think they wash the pots we use now?”

“Yak! You are right.”

“They don’t have water for that either.” Sarah almost convinced me. “How could we do it without anyone seeing us?”

She grabbed the front of my large dress, saying, “I’ll make a pregnant woman out of you.” She blushed when she said, “pregnant,” testifying to her reputation in the

villag of being bashful. Mrs. Mezak once told Miss Farkas that Sarah was so shy and modest she would die as a virgin.

Sarah selected a few undamaged pots and stacked them inside one other. She placed the pots under my dress, just over my stomach and told me to hold them tightly. She put her hands around my waist and we strolled back nonchalantly to our barrack, rattling on the way, and walked up triumphantly with our newly found treasure. Victoria was the first one to see us approach.

“Did you find any water?” she shouted. I thought that was foolish of her.

“Be quiet, the whole world doesn’t have to know,” Sarah whispered.

“So, did you?”

“No, but we got something very useful.” Sarah unpacked the pots from beneath my dress.

“I have no use for them, I don’t eat any of the garbage,” Victoria bickered. The others, though, were pleased to have their own pots. Sarah and I shared one speckled robin’s egg-colored pot. She gave a smaller pot to Mrs. Blum for her own use, and the remaining pots were divided among our group. By the fourth day family circles were established and those women from our village who belonged to other groups, attempted to make closer contact with us, now that we were wealthy owners of a few weather-beaten pots.

When rich and standoffish Mrs. Geller asked if she could join our group, peace-loving Sarah spoke up angrily. “Why don’t you just come right out and ask where we found the pots?”

Mrs. Geller replied she would be glad to pay us for one of them. Magda, a well-seasoned businesswoman, asked jokingly what Mrs. Geller would use for currency.

The woman hemmed and hawed, and then said, she’d pay us back as soon as we got home.

Magda waved her off and we walked away.

Sarah smiled and said if Mrs. Geller had inquired in a friendly way, she would have shown her for nothing where we had found the pots. "Now she is like the rest of us. It makes very little difference who she had been at home."

That night the rotten-smelling tea tasted better from our own pots, although the bread was gray, heavy like lead and tasted sour. With it we got wormy cheese with an odor like the inside of an old shoe. The girl prisoners had carried the bread in a gray horse blanket which was dragged over the leakage from the toilet boxes.

Victoria took one sniff and remarked that back home even the pigs would refuse to eat such dirt.

"In that case, let me eat your portion." Regina acted as if she meant it, because she probably expected that selfish Victoria would gobble up the bread herself. I was ready to reprimand Victoria if she would say anything nasty to sweet Regina, but she kept her big mouth shut and slumped down to the ground like a puppet, whose strings had been cut. First, we thought that Victoria was only pretending, then we realized she really had fainted. Frightened, we ran around asking if there was a doctor in the barracks. On the other side of the barracks, three doctors responded. Doctor Peltzer was the first to rush over. She patted Victoria's face with a wet rag that smelled of tea. Victoria opened her eyes.

"It was a marvelous feeling, like floating in space, I think, I will go back there again." Victoria sighed.

Regina thanked the doctor for her assistance and offered her a portion of her own bread. The doctor refused, and urged Victoria to eat as much as she possibly could in order to stay alive.

Victoria repeated her opinion about the pigs back home. The doctor left us in a hurry.

"She stinks," Victoria remarked, and she could have been referring to the doctor's body odor. Since we had no water to wash ourselves, or toilet tissue, most of us developed a distinctive body odor. It was so noticeable I could even smell my own. Some of the other women smelled worse than I did.

A young woman, fragile like a porcelain doll, had such an obnoxious body odor that at night she was chased away from every group. She came to our group that night and asked if she could sleep with us. Victoria made some foul remarks, but Sarah said this poor soul needed a place to sleep.

Victoria snapped back, "As long as you suggested it, why don't you sleep near this skunk?"

This time I wouldn't let her get away with such a remark.

"Nobody is a skunk," I shouted so hard that the veins protruded from my neck.

"Good, in that case you can sleep at her other side." Victoria raised her nose.

I got hold of the crying woman's tiny hand and assured her I would be glad to sleep near her. She cried, "God will reward you for your kindness."

"She is not only stinky, but stupid as well, if she believes there is a God," Victoria roared.

"Cut it out or I'll slap your face," Sarah shouted back with such anger that everybody gaped at her.

Tibor's philosophy that strong persons don't need God, entered my mind. Was Victoria such a strong person that she could take any abuse without begging for heavenly help, or was she only filled with bitterness and wanted to make the rest of us feel as badly as she did by abusing God to whom we turned for our deliverance? When we lay down that night, it wasn't exactly a bed of carnations, but I slept no worse than before.

In the morning Regina discovered that she and the young woman had something in

common. They both had received their Ph.Ds at the same Swiss university. We had slept with Aggie Morgenblatt, whose father, an atomic scientist, had gone to work in England and in America.

It rained during the Zahlappell, yet we weren't allowed inside until the floors had been washed. We stood in the rain and enjoyed the flow of water over our bodies, tilting our heads back, licking our lips, and swallowing the raindrops. Edit said the rain tasted delicious. We noticed a shivering woman heading toward the windows, about to jump into the barrack. Genya saw her and gave her a thrashing. The blood oozed from the woman's lips and mixed with rain, dripped down her dress.

"Oh, God, that is Mrs. Baras," I recognized her from the train. I wanted to run over to help her but Eta and Clara grabbed my dress and held me back.

"Do you want your head bashed?" Eta asked, and I stepped back to my row.

"On your knees, on your knees," yelled the scrawny red-haired Aufseherin. We knelt in the flow of the toilet boxes.

Soon after, a new transport of women arrived. I saw a familiar face, yet I controlled myself. I waited impatiently until we were allowed to get up and go inside. Not waiting for the rain to stop, I told Lena I was going to see a relative and hurried to the barrack of the new arrivals.

The Block Alteste wasn't in sight, so I jumped through the open window and found beautiful Nora, my grandmother's niece. I had spent many happy summer vacations with her. We ran toward each other, embraced and cried. After we stopped hugging, kissing and crying, she told me her mother was sent to the other side of the camp, and everyone was saying those were taken to the gas chambers.

"That's nonsense," I said. "Just the contrary. They sent the older people and children to the other side for better treatment. I believe she is well." This was only my wishful thinking. Had I thought otherwise, I would have been depressed and without strength to

carry on my life.

As Nora wiped away her leftover tears, I noticed a white mark on her suntanned ring finger. I smiled.

“You didn’t” I exclaimed.

“Yes, I did,” she beamed.

“But when you were younger you insisted, you’d never get married.”

“That was before I met Sanyi.”

“Congratulations! I’m so happy for you,” I said, and we began another round of hugging and kissing. “Where did you meet him? Is he from Palota?”

“No, he was only stationed at a nearby Jewish Forced Labor camp, and he used to come into town for Sabbath Eve. My parents had invited many of these men to our house for a Friday night dinner to give them a little feeling of home. Sanyi visited us only once. Then we heard the rumors that all able-bodied, Jewish, single women would be shipped to Germany.” She raised her arms, and let them down slowly, sighing.

“We heard the same rumors,” I interjected. “So you married Sanyi pro forma?”

Nora bent her head and turned away from me. “No, it was more than on paper.” Her face grew dim. “I think I’m expecting. I heard that the Germans use pregnant women for medical experiments, and perform many kinds of operations on them.”

“Please, Nora, stop listening to such stories. I know the Germans are cruel, but there is a limit how much harm one human being is capable of inflicting on another.” I touched her somber face gently. Then the Block Alteste came in and chased me away.

“I’m in Block No. 7. See me if you can,” I said, and ran.

I rejoined my group and told about Nora, omitting the rumors she had heard.

Encouraged by my success, the other members of our group walked away and searched for relatives. Everyone was anxious, except Victoria. She sat in the shade of the barrack, saying she would hate it if anyone from her former life would see her now.

As the evening Zahlappell dragged on, I had a feeling that the helpers were delaying the counting purposely, just to torture us. While standing in line, I could hear the complaining grumbles of our empty stomachs.

Two lines over from my left side, the Grunfeld women stood patiently. Their family used to own several large department stores before the war. My father often talked about them. Despite of their wealth, the Grunfelds were pleasant and humble. Even now, Mrs. Grunfeld, a stout woman, maintained her dignity. She never pushed when in line, and smiled despite the pain she must have felt on her peeling, sunburned scalp. She hardly complained. She was the first one in the line.

Behind her fidgeted Bella, the oldest of her three girls, the only one married, and she was pregnant. Bella tried to conceal her condition as she, too, had heard that pregnant women were used for experimentation. She appeared to be slightly overweight rather than pregnant. Her oval face had red spots around her eyes, her sunburned skin peeling in the worst way.

Bella nibbled on a piece of bread which her sisters had saved for her from their meager portions. Behind her stood Marti, a tall, blue-eyed, well-built girl. Anni, the youngest of the three, sixteen or seventeen years old, I could only guess, stood behind Marti.

The red-haired Aufseherin who seldom walked between the lines, came by and saw Bella eating the bread. She grabbed her by the arm and yanked her out in front of Mrs. Grunfeld.

"It is forbidden to eat during Zahlappell," she bellowed, and slapped Bella on the face. Bella, surprised, gasped for air. As if instructed by an invisible signal Marti and Anni leaped forward. Marti grabbed the Aufseherin's two hands and twisted them behind her back, slightly pulling up the skirt of her uniform. Anni swung her slim arm and with a loud whack, she slapped the Aufseherin's face.

The Aufseherin's face turned completely red, her skin matching her hair. She was so stunned that her mouth opened with a shriek like a trapped rat.

"No, no, girls," pleaded Mrs. Grunfeld, and attempted to intervene. She took hold of Anni's dress and pulled her back. Anni, huffing, was ready to strike again, but hung her head and retreated obediently. Marti released her hold on the Aufseherin and quickly stepped back into the line. As the furious Aufseherin trotted away, we could feel the impending doom. Soon she returned with two armed soldiers. The lines tightened around the Grunfeld family to form a shield of protection, but the soldiers forcefully wedged themselves between them. Grinning with perverted anticipation, the Aufseherin pointed at the Grunfeld girls, and uttered a few swear words.

Mrs. Grunfeld stretched her arms protectively in front of her daughters. One of the soldiers, much shorter than Bella, dragged her out of the lines and pushed her against the side of the barrack.

Genya made everybody turn about-face, saying, she had to teach us a lesson.

Bella gazed skyward, hoping for heavenly protection. One of the soldiers trussed the point of his bayonet to the barrack's wall, near Bella's right ear, so she could turn only to the left side. Tears flowed from her eyes. She cried out only after the first blow hit her face. She didn't cover her face, only lowered her arms in a vain attempt to protect her belly from the next blow. That precisely was the place she received the second blow.

"Shema Yisroel," Bella cried out. I closed my eyes.

"Shema Yisroel," Mrs. Grunfeld sobbed. I heard the thud of each blow as Bella bounced against the wall, and the curses of the soldiers with each assault. There was a minute lull. I opened my eyes slowly to see Bella's dress torn from the neck to the waistline. Doubling up from pain, she then slumped to the ground.

A soldier turned toward the Aufseherin and asked, "Genung?" (meaning "Enough?"). She nodded and replied, "Ja, ja." Bella was dragged back to the lines,

where she lay in the mud. Two women held Mrs. Grunfeld back from helping her daughter. The older of the two soldiers pulled Marti out from the lines. Instead of sticking the point of the bayonet near her ear, the soldiers pinned her to the wall.

We screamed. Genya warned if there would be another outburst, we would all be punished. "Oh, God, please, stop it," I pleaded. The soldier punched Marti's well-developed breasts as if he were practicing for a boxing match.

I thought, how could I look without seeing? How could I listen without hearing? How could I know without aching?

The soldiers exchanged obscene remarks about the size and shape of Marti's breasts.

The Aufseherin giggled after each blow and threw out her puny chest as if to call the soldiers' attention to her figure that was anything but shapely. However, the men were having too much fun to notice such small distractions. Then they changed their method of punching and aimed instead at Marti's throat. She let out a gurgling sound. Blood spouted out of her mouth and trickled down her yellow, satin evening gown, a grotesque outfit brought to the camp by a misinformed woman expecting to wear it to a ball. Now the gown had a new pattern drawn from blood.

The soldiers finally released Marti. She collapsed.

Next, Anni was dragged out. Mrs. Grunfeld let out a sharp, ear-shattering scream. Even Genya turned away, and her face no longer bore the hateful expression as she heard the sorrowful mother's prayer.

Our lines picked up the Shema.

"Silence," shouted the Aufseherin. We prayed silently, only our lips moved.

Anni resisted. The soldiers had to carry her to the wall. When she was forced to stand, she fought back, kicking and biting them. The soldiers were upset, which gave them more reason to intensify their cruelty. They beat her to submission with pleasure.

Anni fought her best. She kicked one of the soldiers in the shin. He yelped. Pinned against the wall, she spat on the soldier and wiggled this way and that, making him miss some blows, and hit the side of the barrack. Cursing, he told the other soldier to hold her tightly, then with the awkward motion of an amateur soccer player, repeatedly kicked Anni in the belly until her eyes turned upward, and she did not resist any more.

The soldiers walked away with the Aufseherin, talking casually as if discussing the day's soccer game scores. Just as they reached the last row, one of the soldiers pinched the Aufseherin's behind.

Finally, the Zahlappell was called off. Not knowing which one to soothe first, Mrs. Grunfeld dashed to her daughters and kneeled down.

"It's going to be all right, darlings, Momma will make you feel better," she said, wringing her hands.

Women from the Grunfelds' hometown rushed to help. They carried Bella to the hospital. Mrs. Grunfeld wanted to go with her, but she was also bound to stay with her two girls, soon realizing she needed to be concerned only about one. She fell on Anni's dead body, and sobbed like only a mother can. We cried with her.

Dr. Moros came over and examined Anni's body. Two nurses dragged Anni away in a horse blanket.

Victoria turned to me and said, "I hope Anni will have a decent burial like you had given the ladybug."

Later on, Mrs. Lazar strolled by the barrack's side and stopped to talk to Lena.

"Disasters travel in groups," Mrs. Lazar said, morosely.

"You might be right," Lena conceded. "We surely could use some relief in between horror shows."

There was no relief. The next morning's Zahlappell count was three short. The Aufseherinen ran back and forth among the lines, bumping each head as they counted. Yet the count came out the same. After several violent outbursts, one of them looked inside the barracks. On the floor was a woman who had diabetes and was suffering without her medication. Her two daughters sat at her side, and with the bottom of their dresses, they were wiping their mother's face.

"Out, out," shouted the Aufseherin, but the girls disobeyed until she called in Genya to use her whip. Tears rolling down their cheeks, the girls left their mother and stood in line with the rest of us.

By the time the Zahlappell was over the mother's dead body lay in a puddle of urine. Her daughters stood over her, holding each other, weeping. A rabbi's wife sought to comfort and pray with the girls. We joined in, saying, "Amen, amen."

As a child, I would imagine that prayers rose over the clouds and reached heaven. Here, I looked up and saw barbed wires, and doubted any of our prayers passed through.

A truck came shortly. The mother's body was tossed in the back like a sack of potatoes. The orphaned girls trailed behind the truck that spewed dust and smoke into their tearstained faces. When the truck picked up speed and disappeared through the gate, the girls stopped and waved their farewell. They returned to the barrack. Surrounded by friends and relatives, the praying continued.

"If this is the way God treats those who pray to Him, it would be better if they prayed to the devil." I didn't have to guess who uttered such a blasphemous outcry.

Victoria continued. "God was made up by old, bearded clergymen, unable to control their flocks. They invented an invisible super being for the people to fear."

"I don't have to listen to such a talk," Sarah cried, and covered her ears with her hands. "There are other groups I could join. I might even move to the other side of the

barracks among strangers. If anyone feels the same, come with me.”

With the exception of Regina, we stood up, stepped forward and walked away. I glanced back and saw Victoria’s sad, dark eyes and I returned to her side — not because I condoned her fractured ideology, but at least I had God to cling to and depend upon. I had God to sustain me, to give me strength, while she had no faith. Hate was a poor companion even to an atheist or pagan.

I remembered my mother saying that Victoria needed help. “We have to stick together,” I pleaded with the others. “It’s up to us to help Victoria. She needs us.” One by one, the girls returned. Regina kissed me. I noticed tears in her grateful eyes and embraced her.

On Friday at dusk, we reminisced about the Sabbath Eves at home. Sarah explained to Lilla, who had been raised as a gentile, the regulations and customs pertaining to Sabbath.

“Now I’ll be able to tell my beloved fiancé how much I know about his religion,” Lilla said. Her eyes were focused on an invisible, young man, whose whereabouts she had no knowledge of, yet her face shone as if they were together.

I envisioned the somber face of my mother as she kindled the Sabbath candles, and prayed for the welfare of her family. I saw the tiny flames flicker and cast their shadows over the freshly-ironed, white damask tablecloth. My father kissed her and blessed the children, “May God watch over you and protect you.” Oh, my dear father, where is the protection? I could almost smell and taste the soft Sabbath bread, and cried.

At the far corner of our barrack, a tall, slim woman rose and sang the Sabbath welcoming hymn in Hebrew. I had never heard it sung more beautifully. Lilla tilted her head back and her lips slightly parted. She soaked in every word even though she was unfamiliar with the meaning. Magda motioned toward the door. Genya stood there,

leaning against the door frame. Her eyes were gleaming. She, too, must have been recalling her Sabbath memories and the blessings she had received a long time ago.

The hymn ended and a new song began. "Give us the peace of Sabbath," the woman with an operatic voice, sang. I glanced at Victoria. Her face was stiff and emotionless. She wouldn't allow the peace of Sabbath to penetrate into her heart.

The tranquillity was interrupted by the wailing of the air raid sirens. There had to be God, who was about to bring destruction over the heads of our enemies. According to our religion, it is forbidden to rejoice over the suffering of our foes, yet I felt a tingle of joy as the planes flew by. The air raid lasted into the night, and we slept peacefully.

As if we were being punished for the destruction the bombers had caused during the night, there was no tea on Saturday morning. No matter how awful the tea tasted, it was better than having none. Already the morning was warm and it heated up even more by noontime. In the sweltering heat Clara turned pale. She had difficulty breathing, and complained of dehydration.

Anci rushed for the doctor. Dr. Peltzer told her with regret that she, too, was unable to get any tea that morning.

Eta's Aunt Luci said, "If it is possible to give mouth-to-mouth resuscitation, then why can't one of us accumulate our saliva and give some to Clara?"

Her suggestion was received with sour faces. It made my stomach revolt. I vowed I would find a drink for Clara even if it cost my scalp. I knew that I was acting dangerously foolish, nevertheless I was determined to help. While Anci and Sarah stood by Clara's side and fanned her with the hems of their dresses, I placed a pot under my dress and fastened it to my stomach with belts from Lilla and Lena's dresses. I criss-crossed the belts and looped them through the handles of the pot to make sure it would stay put as I walked. Sarah stopped her fanning, and smoothed down my dress over the bulge. She

grinned and asked to come along with me. I shook my head. Eta looked at me with bewildered eyes. "Maybe I should go with you?" I told her to stay with her sister. They wished me good luck.

I explored the sights of several barracks before I reached an open window with white curtains which gave it a civilized appearance. Looking both ways, I sneaked up to investigate. I leaned over and blew cautiously on the curtain until I was able to peek inside. I listened for sounds and being convinced that there was no one inside, I pushed the curtains out of my way and climbed in.

As if I were walking on a minefield, I proceeded with light steps and checked out the room. Through a slightly opened door I could see two Block Altestes having an animated conversation. Neither of them was facing the barrack.

The room was clean and neat. Covered with a colorful cloth, a small table stood by the side of a bed. On the table a family portrait in a folding frame and a mirror were leaning against the wall. I took a quick glance at the mirror, and when I saw my bald, sunburned head I almost screamed, but caught myself. Good Lord, I couldn't be that dirty-faced boy? I thought. My face was dark red with a white circle around my lips like a clown. Black rings of dirt were around my neck and dark circles around my eyes. If I would cry, surely white lines would marble up my face.

The bed stood on tall legs. It was covered with a bed sheet that hung down to the floor. I heard footsteps and hid under the bed, then pulled myself to safety. I sniffled and felt my way in the semi-darkness, until I touched something metal. It was a wet bucket. I dipped in my finger and felt the water. My ears were ringing. My heart pounded loudly. Fearing that I would be surely discovered, I prayed for God's help.

I figured, I'd better drink before they caught me. That way I would have something pleasant to remember while being tortured. I lifted my head. There wasn't enough space for me to lean over the bucket and drink. I felt a rag hanging into the water, even so I

would have loved to drink a few swallows. I thought of tilting the bucket, but that would have been too dangerous. After a few anxious moments, I removed the pot from my stomach. I barely had enough room to dip and pull out the pot. I took a long swallow. The water tasted brackish, and lukewarm. I dipped the pot again and filled it carefully. I gathered the belts, listened for sounds, lifted the sheet and crawled out.

After listening some more, I headed toward the window, trying not to spill the precious loot. Once outside I knew that I had made a big mistake by not formulating any plans to sneak the water passed several thousand thirsty women. Carbonated bubbles surged up my nose and drifted into my eyes. I was ready to burst out into a cry of helplessness.

Shivering with nervous fear, I tried to hide the wet pot under my dress. The pot protruded so far, that nobody could have mistaken me for a pregnant woman. As I tried to walk, the water dripped down my legs.

Since there was no other way I could think of escaping, I began my treacherous trek back to my barrack.

I reached barrack No. 9 when I was stopped by an overweight, panting woman. She asked me bluntly what I was carrying under my dress. I told her my cousin didn't drink her tea and saved it up for me.

The woman offered a portion of her bread for a couple of sips. I refused. She waved her index finger and cursed me. The rest of the road seemed unattainably far. When I finally made it, Mrs. Fogas just happened to be standing by. She was one of the fashion-conscious dames I knew from Fehervar whose life's biggest ambition was to be the first one to wear the latest style outfits. She offered to give me a diamond ring after we got home if I gave her one swallow. I shrugged and walked away. She called me a selfish brat.

Clara lay on Anci's lap, on the shady side of the barrack. She was so weak, that

they had to pry her up into a sitting position. She took one sip and refused any more, saying it was hurting her. Eta encouraged her to drink a little more. Clara opened her eyes slowly and shook her head. Swallowing their saliva, the rest of the girls watched and waited. Magda was the first one to take the pot. She drank and handed it over to Lena. The pot was handed from mouth-to-mouth among the girls of my village. When it was given to Victoria, she asked if she had been included in this luxurious indulgence. I told her to hurry up and drink. She burst out crying. Edit suggested that for my brave deed I should be allowed to take two additional sips of water. Mrs. Fogas stood alone, drooling. I took the pot and gave it to her. She drank what was left and said she would tell my mother what a good girl I had been.

My friends were interested in hearing the details of my adventure. After I told them, Sarah warned, if I ever tried to undertake such a dangerous mission again, she would personally spank me.

Genya suddenly flew into view like an angry buzzard and blew her whistle with a burst of energy. This was such an unexpected time for Zahlappell that I feared my crime had been discovered and I would be executed in public.

To hide the evidence, quick-thinking Sarah tossed our pots and pans under the barrack. I couldn't stop shaking as I stood in line and the brackish water growled in my stomach. "It wasn't worth it," I grunted.

It turned out my fears were groundless. The Zahlappell lasted only a few minutes and we were told to march up to the main road. I was relieved that I wasn't discovered and escaped punishment. As we walked, I touched my unbroken skin all over my body.

On the way toward the gate, I was hoping that after being separated for a week, we finally would be reunited with our families. I was going to tell them about Nora, then I felt sorry for not having had a chance to say good-by to her.

The long line of women was led through gates and yards and out to the open road,

into other compounds, always remaining within sight of the tall fences. The ghastly smell of smoke followed us everywhere.

When nearing the various compounds, we shouted family names and names of towns toward those who stood behind the fences. We passed several all male compounds. The men, too, shouted at us. They knew better than to venture near the fences because watchdogs and armed guards paced at their sides.

A girl from Gyor recognized her brother, who had been reported missing on the Russian front and she shouted his name. Tossing caution aside, he ran toward the fence and a dog tore at his heel. We restrained the girl at our side from attempting to get out of the line.

Those women who had relatives reported missing or dead, were ranting. I shouted my uncle's name and also the name of our village, and wondered what I would do if I saw him?

"Lousy whore, shut your mouth, or I'll slit your throat," a soldier yelled from a few lines behind me. I had no doubt he was capable of carrying out his threat. Yet, I could still hear many women crying out names until we passed the compound.

Our destination turned out to be a large brick building similar to the one we had been herded into after our arrival. Again, we were told to disrobe and keep only our shoes. I was glad to toss away the flimsy rags I had been wearing, although it was good to be able to tear strips off the bottom to use for toilet paper. Now the dress reached above my knees.

The shower felt extremely good, and after delousing we lined up for new dresses. I received a better fitting dress, which I called a "Paris Original." It had a bloodstain from the left shoulder down to the waistline.

Eta remarked that it looked like these dresses had never been laundered, only disinfected. From the smell of my dress this could have been true. At any rate I must have

been quite a sight as my friends laughed at me for raising my nose as if I wore something special. Actually, I was suffocating from the strong smell of the disinfectant.

Magda's well-built shoes had been stolen and replaced by a badly worn, old pair a few sizes smaller than her feet. She had suffered all the way back to Birkenau III, barrack No. 7. Magda kicked off her shoes. Suddenly, the air raid siren blew and the Zahlappell was called off. No food was brought in that night. The morning Zahlappell was held indoors because of another air raid. Magda walked down the lines before the counting began and recognized her shoes.

After the Zahlappel, we began formulating a plan to retrieve Magda's shoes. Eta suggested that Magda walk up to the woman casually, and tell her there had been a mistake and she wanted to exchange the shoes. Magda carried out the plan, but she returned with a sad face.

"That thief refused to hand over my shoes. She claimed she had purchased them at a fashionable store in Fehervar."

"Where did you buy yours?" I asked.

"At your store."

"In that case, I'll go with you and identify the shoes from the trademark on the inside label."

Immediately, we proceeded to carry out the second plan.

I not only recognized the shoes, but also the woman who wore them. She was Mrs. Fish, my former mathematics teacher from Fehervar. How could I walk up to her and demand the return of the shoes?

"What would happen if we told Genya?" Luci asked.

"I'd rather not involve her in this," Magda replied. "Who knows we might wind up getting acquainted with the whip."

There was only one alternative left. At dusk, we had to steal back the shoes. Sarah

volunteered to do the job. The exchange went quickly. We savored our victory, but it was short-lived. In the morning Mrs. Fish had the gall to complain to Genya that someone had stolen her shoes, and led her right to our group.

Genya insisted that Magda take off her shoes.

“Ask this woman what brand of shoes she had been wearing,” I said to Genya, while trying to steady my voice.

Mrs. Fish said she forgot the brand, but she remembered me, wrinkling her brow as if I had said that two plus two equals five.

“This shoe has a special ‘Gloria’ trademark label inside which was used only at our store,” I protested proudly. Genya looked at the shoes and she blew fire at Mrs. Fish for wasting her time. Mrs. Fish had to kneel at the center of the hall all by herself. She threatened to tell my parents about my bad manners, but that was the least of my concerns. I had discovered the hard way that the water I had drunk was fit only to wash floors. I had to run fast. If they would have moved the toilet boxes only a few centimeters away I would have done it in my pants. I recalled my grandfather's ordeal on the train. Of those who drank the water, only Victoria didn't get the runs. It was a mystery why she didn't.

When finally the food was brought in, we had to face the loss of our pots and pans. Sarah searched beneath the barrack. She could find only one, which was better than having to share the other pots with hundreds of women. The slop tasted worse than before. It smelled sour as if it had been left in the sun to ferment. According to rumors, the cans were brought in through the gates before the air raid and left standing for hours. Fearing punishment for not eating the slop, we spilled our entire portion under the barrack. Everyone must have had the same idea. Soon the stinking mess was oozing out from beneath the barrack. We carried some dirt in our hands to cover up the leakage and starved for the rest of the day.

During the second week, among the difficulties, starvation was the hardest to endure. I saw mirages of huge plates loaded with salami, or chocolate bars as large as the barrack. These visions grew out of proportion, and I felt as sick as if I had actually eaten those enormous amounts of food. Nausea gripped my stomach, but I had nothing to vomit. I avoided socializing as food was the main topic of conversation. Anci wandered alone among the barracks. She noticed that I, too, avoided the groups and wanted to know why. I told her.

“Perhaps you can think of something better to do?” Anci asked.

“I’m sure each of us has a special story to tell which would keep our minds off the food.”

The girls agreed that it was a splendid idea. Regina volunteered to be the first one to tell her story.

We gathered near her in the dust and let ourselves get involved in the story she titled, “The Two-toned Boyfriend.”

While attending a university in Switzerland, Regina was cramming for her examination. She only had a few hours of sleep toward dawn. After a quick breakfast, she lay out on the verandah to study some more, and dozed off. Upon awakening, she remembered dreaming of Kurt, a handsome Austrian student she had secretly admired. Seeing him before her suddenly startled her. Kurt wore a short-sleeve shirt. “How long have you been standing here?” she asked nervously.

“Ever since the sun touched your lovely face.” Kurt smiled.

Regina glanced at her wristwatch. “That could have been many hours.”

“Yes, it has been,” he said, and fainted face down onto her lap. At first, she enjoyed having him so close, then she shouted for help.

When Kurt revived, two students led him back to the dormitory. As they walked away Regina noticed the back of Kurt’s arms were two-toned. While Kurt recovered from his

half-sunburn, they became close friends. When school was finished, they corresponded with each other.

“Did you love him?” Edit asked.

“Yes, I did.” Regina blushed.

“Did you tell him?” Magda asked anxiously.

“We told that to each other.”

“Good girl.” Magda had tears gathering in her eyes.

I recalled Magda telling me in the Ghetto about the man she loved, but had been afraid to tell him. I understood her tears.

“It feels good to cry.” Magda tried to conceal the real reason of her tears. “It keeps my mind off the chicken paprikash.”

Edit was the next to present her story. She didn’t give it a title. Being a married woman, we expected her to tell a story connected with her husband.

“Once upon a time there was this young girl, very much in love with a boy. He went away to school into the city. She heard gossip that he had been dating other girls ...”

I knew right away whom she was talking about , and cleared my throat loudly. Edit got the message.

“All right, all right,” she said rapidly, and continued.

“I wrote him a letter, asking to make a choice between the other girl and me. He didn’t reply. When he came home for the winter vacation he avoided me. It was almost the last day of the vacation, and I decided it made no sense for me to wait at home for his call. I went out to the ice pond alone and was determined to have fun. He whizzed by me so close that I could see the snowflakes settling on his long, dark eye lashes. I knew I would die if he didn’t ask me to skate with him. He ignored me, and started to skate a figure eight in the far corner of the pond.

"I skated near him. He had his arms behind his back and he looked only at the ice, pretending he hadn't noticed me.

"It was getting late. I had to do something drastic. I skated across the base of his figure eight and as he turned I wound up getting hooked up in his skates. I tumbled. He prevented me from falling and held me in his arms for a little while. We both laughed. We skated forward and backward. Our eyes were locked into each other."

Edit's voice weakened and she stopped telling the story. Her eyes became hazy and she gasped for air.

"Tell us the rest," Lilla urged. "How soon afterward did you marry him?"

Without a word, Edit put her hands on her chest and fought the pain in her heart. She lay back against the barrack and closed her eyes.

"Did I say something wrong?" Lilla asked.

Eta explained the relationship between Edit and my late brother, Emery. We sat silently for many minutes before I leaned toward Edit and asked why she told the story if it hurt her so much. She said she wanted me to know how much she had loved Emery.

Next, Anci told the story of her engagement ring. She had received it from the mother of her boyfriend, who lived in Palestine, and who had met Anci only once when he came home for some dangerous political mission.

When Victoria offered her story, I hoped she would share a part of her life she had carefully camouflaged under her rough exterior. But the story was not what I had expected.

Victoria had been attending a private school run by nuns. She boasted of the elite and expensive school, where only a select group of young ladies was admitted. She rattled down a list of the names of high government officials, military leaders and bankers, whose daughters were her classmates. This was a preparatory school, where after graduation, the girls were expected to enter a university. Of course, that never

materialized when Jews were denied the right to attend the universities. While still in the preparatory school the entire student body traveled to Italy and visited the Pope at the Vatican.

The students were given an audience with the Pontiff and lined up to kiss his ring. Victoria noticed that all the girls kneeled, and she became panicky. She knew Jewish girls weren't permitted to kneel, but she was in the line and had no chance to back out. She was nervous and wished the floor would cave in beneath her feet.

When reaching the Pope, Victoria bent her head and wished him a "Good Day." He put out his hand to be kissed. She smiled, and passed him by without kissing the ring. The other students were shocked, and murmured. One of the nuns came running and asked if she had been aware of the offense she had committed against His Holiness. Victoria explained she admired the Pope greatly, yet as a Jew, she couldn't kneel. The Pope was told about the reason of Victoria's defiance. He said he admired her conviction. The nuns praised her too, and told her that she had been the only girl the Pope had talked about.

I was tempted to ask Victoria what had happened to those religious feelings, but for the sake of peace and harmony, I refrained from so doing.

Chapter 6

By then a crowd had gathered to enjoy the story-telling. Lilla volunteered the next story.

She lived in a village that had no railroad station. New tracks were laid by the men of the Jewish Forced Labor Corps. One day Lilla was ironing with an old-fashioned heavy iron, heated with glowing charcoal. It as a windy day and she decided not to open the window. Sometimes the sparks blown by the wind would burn whatever was being ironed.

Lilla was home alone. Suddenly, she felt the kitchen turning around her. Luckily, her brother, Marton, arrived shortly after and found her on the floor. He tore open the window and shouted to the workers by the railroad tracks.

“Please, someone, hurry, get me a doctor.”

Five young men tossed their shovels aside and ran toward the house.

“I only need one,” Marton hollered.

.....doctor.....visitora.....g.

Lilla’s army officer boyfriend heard about the Jewish doctor, and he became furious. He sent a message to Dr. Korda, warning him to keep away from Lilla or he, personally, would break his goddamn Jewish neck.

On the first day when the train pulled in on the newly built railroad tracks, the officer was out riding his horse. The whistle of the train frightened the animal and threw the rider. He landed near the embankment where the Jews were still working. It so happened that Dr. Korda rushed to his side. When the officer got his wind back, he

declared that he would rather die than let a Jew give him first aid. Because of the severity of his injuries, he had no choice but to submit to Dr. Korda. The officer was taken to the hospital and from there he had sent a note to Lilla's mother, putting her in charge of keeping the Jewish doctor away from Lilla until he recuperated. Mrs. Szabo promised. However, one day she caught Lilla and the doctor kissing in the gazebo and she forbade him to enter their home. At this point, Lilla stopped her story.

"What happened, what happened? You can't keep us guessing," Clara cried.

"Despite my parents' opposition we became engaged, and if this ever blows over, we are going to get married." We cheered at her story.

"How about telling us what happened to you at the rabbi's house, while you were locked up with the SS?" Luci asked. Due to respect for her age, I controlled myself and refrained from wiping the smirk off her face. The tension was relieved when Lena said she would speak next.

During a summer picnic Lena, a skinny girl with poor appetite, was persuaded by her brother to partake in a pie-eating contest. The plum pie, as big as a cart wheel, was suspended from a rope off a tree branch. A coin valued at ten *pengo* was hidden in the middle of the pie. The person reaching the center first would be able to claim the coin.

The contestants placed themselves cheek-to-cheek around the wheel and waited for the signal to commence eating. There was a narrow space near Lena, and a good-looking stranger asked if she'd mind moving a little so he could also partake in the contest. Lena was glad to oblige and the pie-eating contest began. Lena felt full soon after the start, but she wanted to keep her face near the handsome man. She reached the middle of the pie one second before the stranger.

The contest was over. Lena wiped her face, and received the coin, and for her the real fun just began. The young man, whose name was Peter, stayed with Lena and they chatted for at least an hour. During their conversation Peter hinted ever so slightly

that he could have reached the prize much sooner, but wanted Lena to be the winner, admitting shyly, that he had fallen for her charming, purple face. Lena was a fair player, and insisted he take a five *pengo* bill from her. After some hesitation, he agreed, providing Lena would write on the money, "With love to Peter," and he vowed to cherish it forever. She was bedazzled by his charm, and did as he suggested. They spent the rest of the day together. At night they danced beneath the romantic lights of the Japanese lanterns and drank wine from the same glass.

Peter sang into her ear, "You are my love, my only love." They kissed in the dark, and when it was time for Lena to say good-by, Peter promised to return.

Lena knew fairy tales like this had no new chapters. The next morning she had to take the train to Fehervar. She arrived at the station early and gave the ticket seller ten *pengo* for her fare. In the change she received the five *pengo* with her love note written on it. With tears in her eyes she asked the ticket seller if he knew who had given him the five *pengo* bill.

After some thinking the man said, "Oh, I remember, a man who slept on a bench in the waiting room. I asked him why he didn't go to the guest house. He told me he was a traveling salesman, and made very little money. His wife would give him hell if he spent any part of it for his comfort."

Lena turned aside so the ticket man wouldn't see the tears rolling down her cheeks. The train arrived and Lena watched her Don Juan board the train. She followed him and made sure he noticed her by shouting, good-by to the village idiot who stood behind the fence and had a habit of waving to the passengers.

Peter ducked into the toilet and Lena stood at the door, singing, "You are my love, my only love." As far as she knew, Peter either jumped out the window at one of the stations, or he is still riding the train.

The shrill of the camp whistle blew away our mood of story telling, and brought us

back to reality. We rushed to stand in line, and waited impatiently for the sour, gray bread as if it were fresh butter croissants.

The portions of bread were carried in the horse blanket as usual, and the two girls in charge of dragging the blanket, were very hungry. They nibbled on the bread before they reached our lines. Genya saw one of the girls eat the food and slapped her on the shoulder so hard, that she dropped the corner of the blanket. Many of the bread portions rolled into the toilet leakage.

When the portions were handed out, there wasn't enough dry bread for everybody, and those who received the soaked bread, blamed the girl for dropping the blanket. In the resulting fight, they acted like hungry wild animals, kicking, scratching and biting each other. With horror I watched and wondered how long it would take until I, too, would become an animal.

Obviously, someone felt pity for us and made an arrangement to empty the filled toilet boxes. The next morning a group of stripe-suited men arrived with a truck full of empty wooden boxes. Genya ordered a dozen women to help them unload. Instead of helping the women lift the heavy, leaking, stinking boxes, the men roamed among the barracks. Some walked into the Block Alteste's rooms, while others mingled with the crowd that would gather for any reason at any place.

Our group followed a couple of the men, hoping to get some information about our families. Victoria remained at the barrack side. She never got up unless she was ordered to do so.

Lena asked one of the men in German if he, or any of the others, were from Hungary. Displaying his perfect, white teeth, the man said they were Rumanian political prisoners.

"Rumanians?" Lena sounded surprised. "Why would you be here?"

“For the same reason the Jews are. Hitler wants to annihilate us,” the man replied.

Lena shook her head and returned to the side of the barrack. The other man, who wore his cap to one side over his dark eye, turned to Eta. He formed a cylinder with one hand and inserted his right index finger into the hole, then pulled his finger in and out in rapid motion. He grinned, and pushed his flat belly forward and backward. His motions were unmistakably obscene. He stopped for a moment and from his shirt he pulled out a bar of soap, a chunk of salami and a piece of chocolate, and pointed at them. We gaped. Saliva gathered in my mouth as I sniffed the garlic of the salami. The man put everything back into his shirt, and repeated the motions with his hand and body.

Eta blushed so hard that her freckles were no longer visible. “Do you know what he means?” she asked me.

“I have a slight idea,” I stuttered.

“Let’s go back to the barrack.” She motioned with her hand and with Regina, we joined Victoria in the shade.

We circled several barracks, hoping if the man found no takers, perhaps we could persuade him to give us the goods.

At Barrack No. 20 his advertisement paid off. A well-built, young woman appeared to be interested. She wore a tightly-skirted dress with ruffles around her neck, and even without her hair, she was very attractive. I guessed her age to be about twenty. She followed him to the shady side of the barrack. Her head was hanging and she ignored the gathering crowd. For a moment a weak voice inside me warned to run away, but curiosity made me continue, the same way I had read the censored book, MADAME BOVARY. I could still envision my mother’s angry face, when she discovered what I was reading beneath the schoolbook cover. That image vanished too. The anticipation of a forbidden, real live drama anchored me to the ground.

As the crowd thickened, I was pushed closer and closer to the scene. A loud “oah,” raged through the crowd as the man grabbed the girl’s breast. I crossed my arms protectively over mine. He squeezed her breast and pushed it upward, then leaned forward and repeatedly, kissed her lips. Even in the movies, I had never seen a man kiss this hungrily. I expected he would swallow her mouth. Her expression had an “I don’t care” look.

Luci grabbed Clara by the hand and dragged her back to the barrack. She was two years younger than I, and when Luci shouted for me to follow them, I stood stiffly and forgot to exhale. In Hungary, it was forbidden for young folks to attend any movie that contained a sex or death scene. Since I had seen people die, I reasoned, why not watch another forbidden scene. I viewed this as if it were a part of a movie. Certainly, this couldn't have been reality. Not even at this nightmare town, where all that was considered impossible, became everyday occurrences.

The man pulled up her dress with one hand, while with the other hand he still fondled her breast. It seemed as if he were an octopus. He rolled her dress onto the waistline and tucked it into her belt. Leaning onto the wall, she took over the task of keeping her dress up, but only with the left hand. The right hand hung at her side and didn’t want anything to do with what was going on.

He unbuttoned his striped pants and pulled out his erect penis.

“It surely didn’t take him long to get it up,” I heard a voice behind me say.

“Oh, he must have been ready for years,” another voice replied.

The man pulled down the girl’s panties with a swift motion, and inserted himself into her bald, shaved vagina. She jumped as if stung by a bee. I squeezed my knees together. The crowd let out a definite “ouch.”

He pushed forward and up. The face of the girl twitched. He leaned on even more. Up, up, up, in, in, up, retreating only slightly with each move. With each jerking motion

he banged her against the side of the barrack. He backed down somewhat with his buttock and pushed again with sure, steady rhythm. He was panting heavily, and the same animal-like sound rushed through the spectators.

Suddenly, his expression changed. As if tortured with pain, he moaned, shook himself, and the women echoed the sound. I moaned too. They knew why. I did not.

The man's body slackened. He shook himself twice as if to rid himself of something sitting on his shoulders. He breathed so hard that the ruffles of her dress flapped around her neck. I grabbed for my neck. The man pulled away. His penis retreated like a scared mouse. Where did all that energy disappear? I wondered.

The girl let her dress fall like a curtain after a one act drama. He handed her the goods. She grabbed for them. Face tired, she wobbled away, not looking up or sideways.

The man strutted with his head held up high, and grinned like a winner, expecting an applause for his performance. He jumped up into the smelly truck and from behind the driver's seat, he saluted the crowd, touching the tip of his slanted cap.

I felt exhausted. My pulse was throbbing. "How terrible," I cried and grabbed Edit's arm. She was perspiring profusely. Her dress stuck to her body. I must have been sweating too, because Edit wiped my face

"You poor little girl. I know how shocked you must be, but it is different when you are in the dark, and making love in bed with the man you love."

She called it lovemaking. To me it appeared more like opening up a bottle of fermenting wine that was mistakenly corked tightly. It gushed, spouted, formed and exploded.

"I don't want to get married," Lilla declared as if she were announcing a wish to commit suicide.

The news already preceded us. Victoria was busily spitting into the dust in rapid

session.

“I would rather drop dead than let myself be fucked at the side of the barrack,” she exclaimed. Her expression denoted a stronger connotation than lovemaking. What I saw had nothing to do with love.

Everyone in the vicinity was engaged in a wildly animated conversation. Magda claimed to be the best informed in our group. She said the young woman sacrificed herself for the sake of her ailing mother.

“What kind of a mother is she, who would allow her daughter to act that shamefully?” Clara put it bluntly.

“A blind mother.” Magda spoke as if she were the only one who knew the truth.

Sarah remarked she would rather steal for her mother.

Edit kept herself busy, giving lectures on the beauty of true lovemaking. I knew then that the distasteful picture of a woman being ravished by the barrack wall would stick in my mind forever.

I was skeptical about the existence of a blind mother. Magda was formed of a same cast, like my mother. She could find a fair justification for every foul deed. I set out to discover the truth about the blind woman.

Not wanting the others to know about my doubts, I proceeded alone. A twinge of pain in my lower abdomen reminded me of the event as I passed the spot where the act had been committed. Cautiously, I browsed around, and not seeing their Block Alteste, I ventured inside the barrack. At the door I asked a woman from where did they come? She said they were from the region of Lake Balaton.

“Lake Balaton.” I sighed, and a long filmstrip filled with pleasant memories from past adventures of summer vacations appeared in front of my eyes.

“Do you know if Martha Hertz, the owner of the Echo Point Resort, is here?” I asked. She nodded and pointed to the corner, where an overweight woman sat

motionless, like a statue of a fat goddess.

At first I couldn't recognize Martha. She knew me at once, and called out "String Bean," the name she had given me for being so skinny. Martha had gained lots of weight, only her smile had not changed. With much difficulty, she rose to embrace me, and right away told me about her sorrows.

Martha had a two-month-old baby and during the disembarkation at the train tracks a man with a striped suit advised her to give the baby to her grandmother. They were sent to the opposite direction. Now she was having nightmares of her baby starving. Her breasts were full of milk and that added to her agony. Mrs. Lukacs, a blind woman, sucked out the accumulated milk. After Martha was relieved, Mrs. Lukacs told her to tear strips off her dress and bind her breasts tightly in order to dry up the milk supply.

To me, the whole story was very disturbing although the existence of the blind woman excited me.

Even though I heard horror stories about babies being gassed, I assured Martha that her baby would be all right. Then I asked how the blind woman made it through the selections.

"Mrs. Lukacs wore dark sunglasses, and when they reached the German officer, she walked away arm in arm with her daughter, Kato."

"Kato," I said. Now the girl, who was ravished at the barrack's side, became a real person, not an actress in a drama, but someone who sacrificed herself, someone brave and strong. I was relieved and pleased that Magda hadn't made up the story. "It's remarkable how much a person can endure for the sake of a loved one," I said, and sighed.

We reminisced for awhile, then Martha asked if I were hungry.

"Are you kidding? I'm always hungry."

“What I meant, could I give you something to eat?”

“So you think you are still at home trying to coax me to eat?”

Martha smiled. “I have lots of bread. In our barrack I’m the one who washes the floors and gets an extra portion for doing it. I have to force myself to eat even one portion, so I give the rest away.”

“I would be more than happy to eat your bread, but you see, I’m with a group from our village, and I would want to share it with them.”

She handed me a portion of bread and patted me on the head.

“Good little String Bean.” She put her hand into the pocket of her dress, pulled out something and put it to my mouth. “You have to eat this all by yourself, right in front of me.”

It smelled like chocolate, and even when chocolate was abundant, I didn’t have to be coaxed to eat any.

Putting my good intentions aside to share the chocolate, I allowed her to push a small, square piece into my mouth. It tasted stale, and reminded me of the chocolate laxative children were made to take.

“In heaven’s name, Martha, where did you get chocolate?” I asked.

“I traded it for a bread portion.” I was sorry I had asked. Thinking of the way Kato had earned it made my stomach queasy. I thanked Martha for her kindness and bade her good-by.

Zahlappell was going on at our barrack, and Magda bawled me out for not telling her where I was going.

“Genya will bash your head in,” Magda said, trying to teach me a frightening lesson. This was an unusual time for Zahlappell. But by then, we were used to unusual things. During the march, I divided the bread and told the story about Martha. I didn’t mention the chocolate.

We left the compounds of B III and walked far out into a small, clean town. People went about their business, ignoring us, as if they were accustomed to seeing hundreds of bald headed, ill-clad women marching under heavy guard. We saw women pushing baby buggies. Couples walked together and made us feel envious and homesick for our families.

I overheard two of our guards talking as they walked behind our lines. One of them said that it was his first time guarding women. The other one said he had been doing it for two years, then added, "Wait until we reach the men's compounds, these bitches are going to howl as if they are in heat."

His foul words angered me, and I asked the women in front and behind me not to cry out when reaching the men's compounds. I told them to pass this message along.

Soon we approached the tall fences, and saw groups of men chopping wood. Surprisingly, no one on our side made any sound.

"When are these bitches going to howl?" asked one of the guards.

"They always howled before," the other one said, and shrugged.

We almost passed the compound when a woman from Fehervar recognized her husband.

"Victor, darling," she cried, and before anyone could stop her, she tore away and ran toward the fence. Our guard loosed his dog to attack her. Her husband reached the fence but the guard beat him on the head with an ax. As they slumped into the dust on both sides of the fence, shouting each other's names.

I wished there were some kind of potion to wash this scene out of my memory.

After we were led into the showers and deloused, I received such a tight-fitting dress I could hardly breathe in it. I took it off, dropped it on the floor and returned to the line to hopefully pick up another dress. I had better luck than Mrs. Agai, the stout wife of an attorney, who received the dress I had discarded. She complained loudly until the

guard put his fist into her face. Seeing Mrs. Agai's nose bleed, I felt miserable.

"I would like to apologize to her," I told Sarah.

"Forget it. It wasn't our fault. Besides, if Mrs. Agai's hefty sisters heard of it, they'd tear you apart."

No matter how my conscience bothered me, I kept quiet.

We sat on cold, wet, stone steps and waited until the rest of the women had their showers. On the way back to B. III, I had cramps in my stomach, but couldn't see any place to relieve myself. We had Zahlappell by the barrack and were forbidden to run to the boxes. I was sweating from agony.

At night I had to run out several times, and in the morning I was so pale, that Edit brought Dr. Peltzer to me. I begged her to let me go to the hospital. She said that everyday at four o'clock the SS doctor came to the hospital, and the very ill women were taken away and never brought back. She did give me a pouch of white powder that tasted like chalk, and made me feel as if my stomach was full. Miraculously, I did get better.

As the days dragged on, out of sheer boredom, Regina came up with the idea that we learn a language instead of wasting away the hours. She offered to teach us English or French.

"Why learn English? I heard we are in Poland, and that is near to Russia," Luci argued.

"I want to learn English," I said.

The others, also, had the same preference and we squatted near Regina for our first lesson.

With bits of sticks, we wrote the words on the ground, and Regina taught us the pronunciations. By the end of the week each of us could have been able to order a complete meal in English.

We were just learning to tell time when Nora came to visit. She said she remembered how much I liked to make up stories. The “Exaggerators’ Club” met in her barrack, and they offered a half portion of bread to anyone who came up with the best boast.

It sounded too good to be true, and I was anxious to go with her. My friends wished me luck. What Nora forgot to mention was that the tall tales must be about food. This put a damper on my enthusiasm. My competition was pretty keen. A girl, about fourteen years old, told how she could eat as many cheese *palacsintas* as it would take to line both sides of the main road from her barrack to the gate.

The second girl, a close friend of Nora, boasted she could eat her way out of a room full of poppy seed noodles.

A short woman, as wide as she was tall, said she could devour a chocolate cake as tall as the Eiffel Tower. I felt a sour lump rising in my throat when Nora asked if I could top any of the stories.

I took a deep breath and said, “I could eat a smoked sausage long enough to encircle the equator, the barrack, my waistline, and reach up to my mouth.” My stomach rebelled as I listened to more food stories until the judges made their decision. I was surprised when Nora informed me that I was the winner. One of the judges, a slim, middle-aged woman, handed me a small trophy shaped from bread. I carried the trophy jubilantly to my friends. We admired it for about five minutes, then ate it.

Soon, many other groups were formed. Magda decided to join a recipe exchange group. I would have liked to be included in the Shakespeare discussion group but the members rejected me because I forgot the name of Hamlet’s mother. They didn’t chase me away, though, and I could listen in. My favorite group was at Martha’s barrack where they recited poetry. I not only listened, but participated as well. I also liked the

book discussion group. On the other side of the hospital barrack, an exercise group jogged in the morning and at night. On this specific Tuesday morning one of the joggers stopped at our barrack. She had been running from one barrack to another, searching for members of the Spillman family from Mor. Eta told her there were several in our village, but only Sarah was here with us.

The woman urged Sarah to come with her to barrack No. 29, where some men were digging a ditch. One of them asked about the members of his family. The woman advised Sarah to control herself when recognizing a relative or he would be punished. She ran so fast that by the time the rest of us caught up with her, she was already on her way back. She panted heavily while telling us what had happened. Her brother Ervin was among the men. When the guard looked the other way, he tossed up a folded paper with shovel full of earth.

Sarah unfolded the small paper that barely covered the palm of her hand. The note was addressed to every female member of the Spillman family. Ervin wrote he would be back at the same time tomorrow and wanted to see his wife, Manci. (Manci and her baby had been sent to the other side with the rest of Sarah's family.) Edit's father asked about the Unger family. He would also be among the workers on the following day. We rejoiced with Sarah and Edit.

I could hardly fall asleep, thinking maybe the next day would bring news of my family. Perhaps my father would appear. My head resembled a short brush and I wondered how to cover it so my father wouldn't see.

"How am I going to know the time?" Sarah was worried. I remembered seeing a sundial made of flowers while on vacation at Mount Gellert and told Sarah I would try to make one for her to know the approximate time. I told her to stand up and face the barrack. I made a circle around her and drew a line on her shadow.

"It looks like nine-thirty," Clara said.

"That's good," I said. "Now I'm going to make a better sundial." We gathered some pebbles and I marked the locations of each hour. While I was doing that, beside my camp mates, the Block Altestes and their helpers gathered to watch. Leah, a helper from barrack No. 5, wanted to know what I was doing. Sarah told her about the sundial, but not the reason why we needed it. Leah smiled, and called us "smart Hungarians." I looked up at her and noticed she wore a white apron with green piping. I recognized it to be one of the aprons my mother made me pack into my suitcase.

"Oh, my God," I cried, "that's mine." I stood up. The expression on my face must have been so shocking that Magda noticed it.

"What's the matter with you, my child?" She put her hands on my shoulder. I told her about the apron and begged her to help me get it back. She wanted to know what I had in mind. I suggested we offer Leah a portion of bread. Magda reminded me that the helpers had all the bread they needed. I said, maybe I could plead with her? Magda shook her head.

"It would be best if you forgot the apron. Why risk getting into trouble?" Magda said. It was hard for me to forget something connected with home.

"We will buy you hundreds of aprons just like this, maybe even nicer," Magda said. I felt resentful and wished I had never seen the apron. I picked up a stick and stuck it into the center of the circle as if I were stabbing Hitler's heart.

It rained on the following day and the workers didn't show up. On the day after, we spent every minute that wasn't close to Zahlappell time, across from the ditch, near barrack No. 29.

Ervin appeared in a striped suit. He must have been disappointed at not seeing his wife. No one talked. Edit went berserk and ran up and down the line, back and forth, searching for her father.

“I have to ask Ervin what happened to my father,” she screamed madly. Sarah put her hand over Edit’s mouth.

“What do you want to do, get my brother in trouble?”

When the guards weren’t watching, Ervin tossed over a small package and covered it carefully with dirt. We waited until the men marched away, then Sarah dug up the package and we ran back to our barrack.

The package contained a pink sweater, bread, cheese, salami, candy, a knife, scissors, thread, a pencil and a slip of paper with a list of names, written by Mr. Unger. Lilla’s brother’s name was on the list. I was disappointed because I distinctly remembered seeing my father going with Marton. Edit was the luckiest. She also had the name of one of her uncles.

“Maybe tomorrow the rest of our loved ones will be sending us notes,” Sarah said, and divided her treasure among us. She allowed us to use her knife. We felt very civilized to slice our bread instead of tearing or biting off from the chunk. We used her scissors to cut our nails. Until then we had to bite off our fingernails and those ambitious girls like Eta, who claimed to be double-jointed, even went as far as biting their toenails. I let my toenails grow freely until they bent from the shoe and broke by themselves.

On the following day Edit’s Uncle Jozsi, showed up. She tossed him the slip of paper which contained the names of everyone from our village, including Mrs. Lazar’s. Uncle Jozsi left even a larger package, and we wondered how he could have concealed it beneath his shirt. The package was made of three smaller parts, one for Sarah, one for Edit and one for Lilla. They also shared what they had received. Victoria remarked she had never met such an unselfish group of people. The package also contained a new list. None of my relatives’ names was on it.

On that same day we were lined up by the side of the barrack and received an

injection into our chests. No one knew for what purpose. Victoria staged a scene. She didn't want to be poisoned. Finally, seeing that none of us dropped dead, she succumbed to the needle.

Edit's father came by the next day and after he had left, Edit was beside herself. "My darling, handsome, well-groomed father looks like a corpse. I wish I hadn't seen him. I hope he won't come back. I want to remember him wearing a pressed suit, clean-shaven, and full of smiles," she ranted.

My father's name hadn't appeared on any list so far. I tried to imagine how would I act if one day he showed up in a striped uniform, looking lean and dirty like Mr. Unger. I felt pathetic, yet I wished he would show up soon. Not only he didn't show up, but neither did his name appear on any of the lists which Ervin brought or sent us.

We looked forward to the routine weekly showers. Knowing what to expect, the girls handed over their treasures to Nora, whose barrack had a different shower day.

During this week's shower I received a pair of panties that had a flap opening in back, without any buttons to hold up the flap. Again, I tossed back the panty, hoping to get a better one.

The woman in charge of handing out the panties saw me, and shouted, "Fussy whore. Your mother should be made into a bar of soap."

"Why should she make such a repulsive remark?" I asked, and Lena replied, "Never mind. She was only joking." This kind of joke burned a spot in my memory.

"I wonder when we will get some sanitary napkins?" Lilla asked. "I'm already past due." She, like the most of us, had the same question. Soon, those women like Luci, who "lived" with their husbands while in and prior to the Ghetto, were comparing notes, and they voiced ample fear of being pregnant. As the days passed, it became apparent that none of the women had gotten their periods since our arrival at B. III. Rumors circulated that an additive to the food was the cause, or the shot. We had misgivings

how the lack of menstruation would affect our future ability to bear children and live normal lives. No one told us the answer. The only good part was not having to worry about cleanliness.

The new week began. The morning was cold before daybreak, and Clara shivered badly. Even Sarah's sweater wasn't of much help. She complained of sweating and freezing simultaneously. The doctor said Clara had a temperature, but she advised Eta not to take her to the hospital. When the sun came up, Clara felt better. Sarah wrote a letter to her brother asking him to send medication for Clara. Ervin sent some powdered aspirin. Since we had no wafers to wrap it in, Clara had difficulties swallowing the bitter powder.

In his next letter Ervin wrote that if Dr. Mengele should come to select women at our camp for work, we must be sure to get in. The workers received better treatment and food, although we had lost a considerable amount of weight and our strength had decreased. We saw white lines on our bodies and we feared that this signaled an unknown malady. We prayed that we would be taken soon from here before our health deteriorated even more.

Taking advantage of our longing to be free, fortune-tellers and dream interpreters were offering to tell anyone her future for a slice of bread. They predicted how soon we would be leaving the camp. Many among us believed them, and the impostors did a booming business.

In the middle of our sixth week, Dr. Mengele arrived. He was accompanied by his usual entourage. Zahlappell was called and we were ordered to disrobe and drop our clothing on the ground at our feet. Previously, we had been made to hold it over our heads. The doctor and one of the Aufseherinnen walked down the first row. He selected a few women, made them pick up their clothes and move to the other side of the yard behind the toilet boxes. The rest of us had to remain standing at the side of the barrack.

After finishing the first row, he proceeded with the second row that was in front of me. I noticed that the doctor paid special attention to the hands of the women. It occurred to me that he was looking for strong-handed persons. Magda, Lena, Edit, Lilla, Victoria and Regina were already picked to go to the side of the barrack. I wanted to stay with them. I put my hands together in prayer. All my life I felt uneasy about the size of my hands. Mother used to say I would make a fine pianist. According to Mrs. Mezak, they were the hands of a midwife, and Uncle Harry insisted I would make a skillful pickpocket. The doctor motioned for me to follow Regina. I was glad of having had large hands.

Sarah was picked to join the group at the side of the toilet, but when the doctor moved up to the next row, we pulled her back to our side. After the doctor went through the fifth and final line, the Aufseherin counted those he had picked, and it was one extra. Mengele looked over the group he had selected to stand at the barrack and pointed to Sarah as the one he didn't select for work. He made her step out of the line and join the other side.

"I'm shocked what a damn good memory he has for faces," Victoria said. "Looking over 610 women, he still remembered Sarah." Magda said that perhaps it was meant to be for Sarah to stay here where she could see her brother, but Sarah cried that she had to follow Ervin's advice. She also wanted to stay with us.

There was another selection at the toilet boxes. Clara, looking pale and ill, was pulled out and made to stand on the road, leading toward the hospital. Although Eta, Luci and Anci weren't selected, they joined Clara and nobody stopped them.

The doctor and his group left the camp, and those of us chosen to stay by the barrack, were ordered to move inside. The guards paced up and down, and made sure nobody climbed out. Eta rushed to Nora and Anci to Martha. They ran quickly to the window to say good-bye to me. Edit and Lilla wrote letters and tossed them out to Sarah

to give to their relatives in case we were late from returning from work, or wouldn't be back at all.

Mrs. Lazar was picked to go with us, but she went to the window and begged the women standing on the outside, to switch places with her because she had dreamed she would see her husband the next day. Sarah heard Mrs. Lazar and said she would gladly take her place.

"God help you and keep you, Sarah, for taking a chance for my sake," Mrs. Lazar said. When the guard turned his back, Mrs. Lazar crawled out the window while we pulled Sarah in by her arms.

After the exchange was made, we prayed that the switch wouldn't be discovered. Through the window Sarah handed the folded letter to Mrs. Lazar and instructed her the method of delivery.

Seeing our successful exchange, other women took courage and those who had been separated from their families on our first day, wanted to make sure they stayed with the relatives they still had. The exchanges by each window continued until Genya came in and shut the windows. She also put guards on the inside of the barrack.

A slim teenager separated from her sister was stopped from opening a window. She ran in circles like a sheep with brain disease and screamed so loudly that Genya returned and slapped her face. But the girl continued. Genya slapped her again and again, yet even then she would not stop.

Genya opened the window and shoved out the girl, and pulled Angie Morgenblatt into the room. Then she blew the whistle and with the help of the Aufseherinen they herded us to the main road. There the fight began. Those who had failed to join with their families through the windows put up a last furious struggle to reunite. Women engaged in a hand-to-hand combat to get in or out of the lines and make the exchange.

Eta watched with a somber face, and I weighed the possibility that I might never see her again. We had grown up together, and although our friendship had cooled in the past few years, I still hoped someday we could be close to each other again. I was determined to take her with us. Birkenau was hell and no matter where we would be taken, it couldn't be any worse. I reached out of the slowly-moving battle line and grabbed her hand.

"Come with us," I shouted, and pulled Eta in. She was holding onto her sister's hand, and with Luci and Anci the four of them joined the lines.

An Aufseherin saw our maneuvering. She rushed over to us and asked Eta if she had been selected for the transport, but Eta didn't understand. Neither she, nor her sister, had ever learned to speak German.

"Tell her, 'ja, ja, ja,'" I screamed, but it was too late. They were shoved aside. I turned back. Feeling totally helpless I cried, "Try at the back of the line." Clara was pushed down into the dust, and she couldn't get up.

Eta waved at me, "Tell our parents that we'll never return to Hungary. If they want to see us they should meet us in Palestine."

Tears welled up in my eyes. In my heart I already mourned the loss of a friend and the memories of the childhood we enjoyed together. We used to play a game when we drew large circles on the ground and pretended they were different countries. I never wanted to jump into any circle without Eta. Now our circles were destroyed and I had no strength to do anything about it. I remembered with painful regret that at school I had done Eta's German homework, and she done my mathematics. Now we both had to pay for our childhood mischief.

..... "*Isten veled, Eta*" ("God be with you."), I cried, but the rows were moving faster. The crowd swallowed up my friend.

Outside the gate of B. III, things quieted down.

“We’ll never see our families again,” Edit sobbed. Lilla joined in, saying “We should have found a way to stay.”

Lena tried to soothe them, saying they might even get a chance to meet the rest of their families on the outside.

While passing by one of the fences, we saw old women sitting on the ground, with hammers. They were chopping bricks which were piled up in front of them. I thought what a horrible job for such old people. Surely Grandfather was working in a big butcher shop.

We were nearing a large brick building, and those who were in the first line read a sign. “GAS CHAMBER EXIT, ENTERING FORBIDDEN.” Horror swept over the crowd, and we stopped, abruptly.

“Keep moving,” Genya shouted.

The Aufseherinen urged us from the back rows, yet the lines stood firmly as if our feet were glued to the ground. The German female beasts shoved and kicked those standing near to them, but even that didn’t make the rest of us budge. The scene appeared as if it were a field of wheat, blown by the wind, the heads of the sheaves bending forward, but the roots embedded firmly in the soil.

The intensive fear disarranged my mind. I was so horrified and depressed that I thought it would be a relief if I didn’t have to suffer any longer.

“I have had enough of this,” I told Regina. “I’d just as soon die.”

“You, of all people, who ate the garbage and encouraged us to keep holding on, why would you want to die?” Her eyes filled with tears. “No, not you,” she whispered.

“I’m sorry. What came over me? How can I explain? It must have been another person, a starving godforsaken creature within me.”

“Why should they select able-bodied women to die?” Sarah interrupted.

Edit joined, “Perhaps those not strong enough would die on their own.”

“We can expect anything from the Germans,” Magda remarked. We stood glaring at the building. Soldiers were sent for and they made us move forward. I drifted with the crowd, not thinking, not feeling. My legs moved independently of the rest of my body.

“Look at those shoes,” Sarah shouted, pretending to be cheerful. “There are more here than at your father’s store. This has to be a message from him.”

I turned halfheartedly at the huge pile of shoes. Yes, there were more shoes than I had ever seen. The will to live returned to me.

“If any of you want to exchange your shoes, step out of the line and look for a better pair,” Genya instructed.

“You see, why should they give us new shoes if we weren’t to be saved,” Sarah exclaimed.

“I think I need a pair,” Lilla said, and approached the shoe mountain.

Sarah pulled out a couple of needles from the heels of her shoes and told me to hold them while she went to get herself another pair. When she returned she put the needles into the heels of her new shoes. I marveled at her inventive mind and no longer turned toward the building of death. I was also distracted by the tall piles before me of empty toothpaste tubes, eye glasses, fur coats, hats and other articles. The daughter of the merchant awoke in me.

“What an unusual warehouse sale,” I said, and the memories of the past gave me strength for the future.

Further down, we were stopped in front of a large cement block, embedded deeply into the ground. It had eight equal-sized, square holes, and from the sniff of it we knew right away these had to be some new style of toilets.

Genya shouted, “Use the cloacal if you have to.”

In the middle of the biggest traffic of prisoners, guards, Aufseherinen and dogs,

none of us hesitated to use them.

Lena backed up and sat over the edge. “Plop, plop,” she said, making funny faces, and laughing. We laughed with her. Genya must have heard us and warned if we didn’t stop laughing, she would push us into the hole. We obeyed her instantly.

The thought of being pushed into the human waste made me sick and I held my hands to my mouth.

The Aufseherinen made us move on, and we were told to settle on the railroad tracks.

“I have a premonition,” Magda said. “The boxcars will be here soon.”

There were no boxcars in view. Food cans were brought up to us and we received a bowl of real bean soup. Although I still felt nauseous, I was famished enough to eat. Surprisingly, there were no weeds, no wild flowers, or charcoal in the soup. It was thick and warm and even without salt, we lapped it up as if it had been prepared by a world-famous French chef.

Sarah found a bone, an indication, that there might have been some meat cooked in the soup. She asked if any of us cared to chew on it because she wouldn’t eat *treyfe* (non-kosher) meat.

Lilla asked with honest concern, what difference it made as long as the juice of the *treyfe* meat was already cooked in the soup. Sarah laughed at the way Lilla pronounced *treyfe*, and handed her the bone. Lilla examined it. “It sure has a strange color,” she said, and wrinkled her nose. “Do you suppose it is horse meat?”

The girls stopped eating and made sour faces. They spat out their soup.

“I don’t care what kind of meat this is as long as it is edible,” I declared. Regina patted me on the shoulder. “Keep on,” she said.

“My father told me during the war he traveled through countries where the famine was so great that people resorted to eat cats or dogs,” a woman behind Edit said. Her

remarks made the situation even worse.

A girl near the tracks stopped eating. "You should worry," she said, smiling. "I saw similar bones at my father's laboratory, and they were human bones."

"Don't be silly, Suzie. The Germans are proven to be inhuman, but even they wouldn't make cannibals out of us," an elderly woman said. Now everyone turned green.

And not to make things easier, Magda told a story about a traveling salesman whose job was to sell bouillon cubes to a tribe of cannibals in a jungle. While they placed him in a pot of water over the fire, he tried to convince them that the cubes would make better soup than he.

The conversation about the soup bone was halted abruptly. We were chased into an empty building which had the appearance of a Roman amphitheater. The concrete steps and the floor at the center were wet as if they had been washed recently. I speculated when the lions would enter.

The floor was so cold that in order to be able to sit down, I had to place both of my hands beneath me. When it became darker, just like the others, I did lay down on the floor. Sarah put her sweater on the floor and one of the sleeves reached me. Soon the sweater became saturated.

"We are all going to get rheumatism," Edit moaned.

Lilla made us promised that we would visit her doctor fiancé for treatments.

The blow of a whistle woke me up, and was surprised at the strange, new surroundings. I still hoped every morning that I had been dreaming and I would find myself at home in my own bed. I noticed that Regina was putting on her dress.

"Why did you take it off, were you that warm?" I asked.

Regina explained she had awakened during the night and saw Victoria shivering. She removed her own dress and covered her cousin. I was touched by her concern,

and also saddened because Victoria took it for granted, and didn't even thank Regina. If I had any spare energy, I would have started an argument.

"If we ever get home, I'll never go on a reducing diet again," Magda cried.

During the morning Zahlappell we happily discovered that Genya was no longer with us. We received a whole cup of tea, a good sign. Until now, we measured our allotment in swallows. We had our shower and delousing and for once, each of us received decent-fitting clothes. Sarah was sorry she had no way to save the sweater, which her brother had given her. She still had her needles.

The guards forced us to the railroad tracks and we saw boxcars pulling in.

"The Pullman cars are ready for our service," I said, just to make conversation. Sarah, Edit and Lilla huddled together and cried. Had they stayed at B.III, they would be getting ready to meet their loved ones. Lilla expected to see her brother for the first time. I hoped, since Marton had walked away with my father, he would bring some information about him and I, too, joined the weepers.

We were counted again and told to embark. Immediately, scuffling and fighting broke out. As seasoned veterans of past boxcar rides, we knew how important it was to stay with friends and to secure the right spot. Fighting became part of our survival. The battle for spaces was still raging when two soldiers climbed up. As the Hungarian saying goes, they had already eaten the better share of their bread, meaning, they were getting along in years. We were only given one pail, and the thought of not getting water on such a hot summer's day created panic among us. The soldiers did their best to quiet us down. They sat at the open door, with their backs to us and the feet dangling out the boxcar. The train moved slowly as we rode out of the big gate. "LABOR MAKES FREE," the sign said over the gate. Were we heading for freedom? I doubted it.

“Will we ever see our families again?” Sarah moaned.

As the train picked up speed, the barbed wire fences grew smaller and smaller behind us. In a little while, we could only see the watch towers. It was a mild relief that their guns couldn't reach us any longer. The further we traveled the fresher the air became. We no longer had to breathe the foul smoke. Soon the breeze brought the fragrance of hay and wild flowers.

Chapter 7

The train sped through the countryside, and even though we were crowded in the boxcar, we could still inhale the clean air that came through the open door.

After awhile the old soldiers, the sad relics of World War I, with ragged battle scars decorating their faces, turned toward us. It was a surprise that the one who had a wired jaw, introduced themselves to us, and started to talk to those sitting nearby. Johann asked Magda how long she had been in Auschwitz. She told him the day we had arrived. Johann wanted to know how it was possible that none of us had numbers tattooed on our arms. Magda had no answer. Then he asked what our nationality was. Magda told him. Johann began to reminisce about his visit to Hungary many years before. He said he loved goulash and Gypsy music.

“Can anyone of you sing, ‘I drank red wine last night?’” His voice was so pleasant and not at all commanding, that Magda sang the requested song. Others joined in. Johann hummed a few bars and beat the rhythm with the bottom of his rifle.

The other, whose name was Fritz, kept a gloomy face. The Hungarian tune had no effect on him. After we finished the song, Magda suggested we sing a German song to please him, too.

“Oh, Tannenbaum, Oh, Tannenbaum,” we sang the song most of us had learned in school. Fritz’s face turned brighter. He urged us to sing some more. Most of the women agreed to join. Victoria remarked she wouldn’t waste a breath on those killers. The singing halted when the train slowed down at a quaint, old-fashioned station. The building was as ancient as if it had been cut out from the faded pages of a fairy-tale

book. The station master wore a tall, black hat with golden braids, and he smiled and waved when the train rolled by.

For our first meal, we received a piece of bread. It was much lighter in color and softer in texture than the bread we received in Birkenau. It had no foul smell and even tasted better. Soon we discovered the soldiers ate the same kind of bread. This gave us some hopeful indication that we were heading toward an improvement.

Shortly after we ate, a military hospital train, loaded with injured soldiers, rolled by. Until now we could only see our own blood being shed, and I admitted to Edit I felt a tinge of pleasure out of seeing our enemies suffering for a change.

"Tomorrow's papers will report light casualties," Edit remarked. In our estimation, there could have been hundreds and hundreds of wounded young men on that long train.

"All your sons should look like they," I heard a voice, and took it for granted that it was Victoria. It turned out to be a middle-aged woman with a deep gash on her lips. I asked if anyone knew who she was. Angie Morgenblatt said the woman was Mina Komlos, a well known newspaper columnist. Once she had slighted a local celebrity. When the Germans marched into her town, the slighted woman brought a couple of soldiers to seek revenge against the reporter. That was the reason for her split lips and sharp tongue. I thought she would be a good friend to Victoria whose source of bitterness was still a mystery.

We saw many more hospital trains. I said, "The German mothers should join and shout, 'Enough of this slaughtering!'"

"No, they just suffer silently like the rest of them," Lena said.

The night was quiet. Sleeping on Magda's behind was no longer comfortable. Just like the rest of us, she had lost too much weight. Suddenly, the air raid sirens wailed as we reached another town. The planes flew closer, and I could tell right away, their

humming had a different sound than the German planes. I thought of my cousin, Lacko, trying to imagine what could have happened to him.

Our train was moved to the side tracks. The guards jumped off, chained the door behind them, leaving us unattended for the safety of an air raid shelter. We slept peacefully during the bombing, trusting that someone up there was punishing our enemies.

There was no whistle blowing and no Zahlappell in the morning. As we glanced out through the open door, we could see forest-covered mountains and green valleys, bejeweled with dew. The scenery resembled a picture postcard, until another train came tearing by, loaded with soldiers, going toward the opposite direction.

Victoria composed a special "blessing" for them.

"May the Russians tear you into small pieces and only your uniforms could tell that you have been soldiers." And we chanted, "Amen."

How could I have sunk this low to condone such a horrid curse? Perhaps the influence of Victoria overcame my better senses. She had lovely shaped lips. How could such an ugly curse flow out of them?

I turned to Sarah, "I'm afraid, soon we all will be talking like she."

"It helps to let out some bad steam," Sarah said.

On the second day of our journey, during a short stop, Doctor Peltzer and two nurses came up to see how we were doing. One of the girls, with whom I had shared a cup of tea the previous night, complained of feeling badly. The doctor examined her and asked the soldiers if there was a way the girl could be isolated from the rest. Johann shrugged and said there was nothing they could do.

Now we began to worry. Although the doctor didn't share her finding, we believed the sickness had to be contagious, otherwise why should the doctor have asked for isolation? There was no way any of us could avoid being in contact with the sick girl.

On the third day we passed by a long, high mountain range. From the distance we could see men in striped suits coming out of and going into the mountainside. They pulled small wagons and looked like elves.

“Do they whistle while they work?” Edit recalled the song from the American movie, “Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs.” Thinking perhaps the men were Jewish, restless silence was our answer.

Later on, just as we rolled into a large station, another air raid hit us. The train backed up and halted on the side track, near a standing military train. The guards left us inside the locked boxcars and ran for safety. Through the windows we could see the military train with a long line of flat beds, each of them loaded with various kinds of vehicles. As they were camouflaged, we could only see their silhouettes. The airplane pilots could have known what the wrappers were hiding because they flew low and strafed the military train.

Our panic was like an introduction to madness. Crazy women were screaming as the sounds of horror inside shook the boxcars almost as much as the sound of the guns of the airplanes. Women pounded on the walls, as others scraped the floor with their fingernails. Magda and Lena were kicking the door, and each of us in our own way joined the futile attempt to escape our enclosure. I covered my ears as the reverberation clawed on my eardrums. My skin felt as if someone were rubbing me with hot sandpaper. The roots of my very short hair tingled and my heart, ready to escape from my chest, pounded loudly and made me dizzy. “Oh, God, are you too in the air raid shelter?” Then I didn’t feel anything. Perhaps I was already dead. But death was supposed to be silent. Or perhaps there was a transition period when the sounds of the living accompanied the dead to the other world. Someone punched me in the belly. I felt the pain. I was alive.

The whole nightmare seemed everlasting. Actually, it was only a few minutes. The

planes departed as fast as they came. The guards returned and found a group of half-crazed, hysterical women clinging to each other, or lying exhausted on the floor. Some of the women were licking their bruised finger knuckles. Others gazed into the air, hypnotized, ready to explode on command. Magda said she felt she had broken a couple of her toes while kicking the door.

Neither of the two soldiers looked at us as if they had enjoyed the sight. Fritz remarked that it was a wonder that none of us had died.

Our train pulled out at full speed. The military train wasn't going anywhere. Each flat car was aflame and as we looked back, it appeared that the tracks which we had left behind, were also burning.

It was terribly cold that night and even with fifty-five women huddling together, our bodies still couldn't warm up. Most of us shivered, and teeth chattering kept many awake. Again, Regina removed her dress and covered her cousin Victoria. Magda warned that Regina shouldn't be that unselfish and noble, because Victoria had her own dress to protect herself. Then Magda said from now on, we should act like a real family and watch out for each other's well being. Although she wasn't the oldest of our group, maybe she felt like a mother and wanted to protect every one of us. Lena and Sarah were much older, yet they both agreed willingly to let Magda be the head of our family. Her first act as our mother was to touch each of our foreheads and feeling no fever, she kissed us, while the soldiers looked on and smiled.

Later on we pulled into an enormous freight yard. Johann said that we had reached Berlin. Neither of the soldiers had ever been in the city. Regina told them she remembered being there when she was only eight years old.

Mina Komlos let out a volley of curses at the city but Regina stopped her, saying

that the buildings and the streets weren't responsible for the way the people acted. We were sidetracked during another air raid. No airplanes appeared. Our train waited on the tracks for a whole day without moving. For the night, we were locked up again. During the next day the guards stayed with us. They got off once in awhile to stretch their legs. We overheard them saying that because the continuous air raids and waiting, by the time we reached our destination, we wouldn't have any energy left to work as they had run out of food.

My eyes were hazy as I viewed the scenery. A long line of mountain-ash trees were showing their orange-red clusters of berries, and birds were having their fill between the branches. I tried to imagine the taste of berries.

The day without food drifted into a listless night and the next day when the sun was about halfway on its eternal path, the train slowed down and halted on a one lane track near a low fence. The door of the boxcar slid open and the soldiers gave us only token nudges with the butts of their rifles to make us disembark. We plopped onto the tracks like overripe apricots. Magda sat on the track and said she smelled pine trees. I thought she had lost her mind until I looked around with my weary eyes. I noticed that we were indeed in a pine forest, enclosed by a fence of fragile, chicken coop wires. A soldier leaned against the fence and smoked. Obviously, the wires weren't electrified. There was no guard tower, no machine guns, no search lights.

"We must be in the wrong place," I told Sarah.

"Aha," she said. Her eyes were still closed.

But we were in the right place. "Sit down you Schweinehunde, Jewish whores," hollered a hefty officer, who would never see the lean side of forty again. He reminded me of an old, worn out rooster, no longer popular at the hen house, and being fattened for a Sunday meal. His order was easy to obey. Most of us were too weak to stand up. I sat on a clump of grass, and ran my fingers through the cool, green blades. Even in my

partial mental and complete physical fatigue, it was such a pleasure to be able to touch nature again. As the mild breeze revitalized me, I noticed beyond the fence there were only a few wooden barracks. Large, flowering bushes graced both sides of each barrack.

“What do you think that ugly-looking building across the fence could be?” Lena mumbled as she leaned against Magda’s back. Magda didn’t reply.

“It looks like a cement dragon,” I said.

“What the hell is a cement dragon?” a woman behind me opened her mouth.

“Who cares.” Edit was in no mood for images.

“I see bunk beds through the windows. Maybe they’re for us?” Lena asked. Magda didn’t show any interest. She gazed with confused eyes at the tall trees, as if she were in a different world.

“I can hardly wait to try out the beds.” Victoria let out a weak sigh. She sat like a rag doll, flopping one way and to another. With both arms Regina tried to support her. Lilla found an aluminum tinsel laying in the grass. She picked it up and said it didn’t seem like Christmas was here already. She blew on the tinsel, and slumped back onto the grass.

Our rest was short-lived. A sickly looking, scrawny, blond Aufseherin blew the whistle and yelled, “Zahlappell.” From our past experience, we had learned to obey fast, even though our bodies refused to cooperate.

“Hurry, hurry,” screamed the Aufseherin. It took awhile before we mustered enough energy to get up and stand in line.

The officer in front of the lines began to indoctrinate us with the rules of the camp. In his introductory speech, the adjectives he used to describe us, were familiar, but it also included some new variations. He spoke with a weird accent. He said he was the Hauptscharfuhrer and that was Gretl, the head Aufseherin. Gretl had red hair, watery

gray eyes, a lobster complexion, small bosom, big behind and bowlegs. Her attire was neat as if she had spent hours in front of a mirror without improving her ugly appearance.

The Hauptscharfuhrer pointed at the cement dragon and explained that was the factory where we were going to work. He embarked on a lengthy oration about the factory, and warned if one of us would try to escape twenty would be shot, blah... blah... blah... We heard all that before. After his speech, he told us to stay in line and coffee would be served. The good news perked us up one degree, but most of us were too weak to hold onto the tin cup that was passed from mouth to mouth. Compared to the other garbage we received, the imitation coffee, even without milk and sugar, was tolerable. We were also given a thin slice of bread and I gulped it down with one swallow. The crust scraped my throat on the way down and sat in my stomach like a clump of clay. After the food was consumed, Gretl made a speech, hissing with each 's'. She concluded that we had to select a Block Alteste among us. We were utterly exhausted and cared less who would be our leader. Two helpers were also picked for each of the barracks. After that was settled, Gretl told us we could go inside the barracks.

BOOK FOUR

Chapter 1

Upon entering, we noticed that the barrack was divided by a long corridor with doors on each side, like in a hotel. Several Aufseherinen directed traffic by shoving the women into the rooms as they walked into the corridor. Our family was moved into the first room, numbered 30, only I was pushed into the second one, numbered 32. Finding myself among strangers, I became frightened, and kept peeking out of the door. As soon as the Aufseherinen walked further down the corridor, I sneaked out and ducked into the room of my friends. Magda asked if there was an unattached person, kind enough to trade places with me. A young girl with blond, brush-like hair was willing. Every member of my family thanked her. They all embraced me as if I had been gone for years.

The walls could once have been painted white, now were decorated with smudge marks of various shapes and colors. I counted sixteen double bunk beds. A table and two chairs stood at the window, giving the place a more livable appearance. The beds had no mattresses, no pillows, no blankets, only a few battered, wooden slats. We perched on the ledges, facing each other in silence.

I became impatient. "Who wants to come with me to explore our new lodging?" I asked. Sarah offered to come along to discover what surprises the barrack contained. She stuck her head out of the door to make sure there were no Aufseherinen in sight, then she motioned to me and we sneaked out into the corridor. Just as I closed the door behind me, I heard Magda's warning to be careful. We walked cautiously down the corridor and ended up in a large bathroom with dozens of faucets. I told Sarah to watch the door while I tried to see if the faucets were real. I leaned over the basin,

turned on the nearest faucet and was unable to contain my joy when I saw water gushing out.

“Wahoo!” I shouted, and slapped the flow of water between the palms of my hands as if I were applauding it. I bent down, and let the water flow over my face, frolicking like a baby duckling. The water was cold and refreshing, however it tasted brackish. Learning from past experience, I spat it out. Sarah wanted to have her own personal discovery and asked me to stay on guard while she ventured in into the next room. Hearing Sarah bellowing from the adjacent room, I shook the water off my face and hands and rushed after her. There I found a row of white porcelain, running-water toilets. Like a queen on a throne, Sarah sat on the first one, smiling. I turned around and ran out.

“Don’t leave me alone,” she shouted.

“I’m going to tell the others about the bathroom,” I said. Sarah ran after me.

“Guess what we discovered at the end of the corridor?” she asked.

“A restaurant?” Magda asked, jokingly.

“A toilet with water!”

Everybody got up, ready to rush out, when our newly appointed leader entered the room. She told us we could call her Block Alteste Berta. Her head resembled a black and white bristle brush. She was top-heavy with a slim bottom and skinny legs. If someone molded Berta and Gretl together, they would come up with one well-shaped woman.

Berta spoke softly, yet firmly. She instructed us to select a room leader, effective in counting heads. Magda volunteered. There were thirty-two women in the room, a pleasant change from living with six hundred and ten. After the head count Berta told Magda it was her duty to count us each morning and night and report the number to her helpers, Kato and Bozsi Fogas. There were other duties enumerated by Berta, and

Magda stood at attention as if she were a real soldier. After Berta left, the women hurriedly checked out the bathroom and the toilets. Meanwhile, I browsed around our room and located the electric switch near the door. I turned it on and off, and enjoyed having the control over the light. I was amazed how an insignificant object I had ignored back at home, had taken on such importance after being deprived of it only for a couple of months.

"Stop that playing," Magda asserted her newly acquired authority. I went to the window, opened and closed the flimsy curtains, which were badly in need of laundering. The curtain rods were rusty. I had to tug hard on the cord. I continued the exploration of the room as if I were a child searching for old friends until the whistle blew. We were lead out of the barrack and into another, smaller one which served as a storage room. We each received an empty straw sack and was told to fill it with straw and carry it back to our rooms. Filling was the easy part. When my sack was filled, I couldn't lift it. I suggested to my friends that we help each other with both jobs. This worked out well, and other women followed our example. Instead of dragging it on the sidewalk (yes, there also were sidewalks), two carried each filled sack. After the sacks were in place, Magda told us to choose bunk partners. For being the room leader she had the first choice. She lay on the bottom bed. Her sister Lena, being older, refused to climb, therefore, Magda asked if anyone would like to be her bunk mate. Victoria wasn't too anxious either to sleep on the top, but weighing the possibilities of future benefits of being close to the leader, she said she would like to be Magda's partner.

Regina's face dropped with disappointment, and said it would suit her fine to be Lena's bed partner and to climb up. Their bunk was in the center of the room. Edit and Lilla claimed the next bunk across from Magda's. Since there was no one else left, I offered Sarah to be her partner. She was much older than I, so I climbed up and stretched myself. Being pricked by straw bits didn't diminish the pleasure of having my

own bed. I sang an old military victory song, until Magda told me to hush up.

“Jawohl,” I said, somewhat angrily, as it seemed that Magda was acting strangely. The two barrack helpers interrupted our relaxation and brought in arms-full of merchandise. They put Magda in charge to divide the goods. Each of us received a coarse, gray horse blanket, one new flannel nightgown, a huge handkerchief, a small white towel, a tiny grayish medicine-smelling soap, a red aluminum bowl, a soup spoon and a white cup. We were told all this belonged to us. I was about to shout a few words of appreciation, when Victoria doused my enthusiasm by saying she feared the Germans probably wanted blood in return for what they had given to us.

I gathered my things sadly and sat by the window. Magda pointed out that the barrack No. 1, I was looking at, was the hospital. Since she didn't tell me to stay put, I decided to go out and survey the place. I put my treasures on the top of the bed and asked Sarah to watch them.

The hospital had the same setup as our barrack. The first room was small. Doctor Peltzer stood by, talking to one of the several nurses, whose room was on the opposite side. There were many smaller rooms, each one with only two beds. One of them was occupied by the girl who became ill on the train. Doctor Peltzer warned me not to enter that room. The next, and much larger, was the examination room. A long table, covered with a white sheet of paper, stood in the middle. Another smaller table held rolls of paper bandages and a few bottles. I passed by without reading the labels. At the far end of the corridor I saw a small bathroom and a toilet. On the way out, I complimented the doctor for the fast work they had done to prepare the hospital. She said it was already fixed up when they arrived.

I went back to room No. 30, and told about my findings to the rest of the family. Sarah said she would pray to God that none of us would have a need to stay at the hospital.

After Zahlappell we were given our first dinner. It was a concoction of potatoes and sour, red beets. None of us had ever heard of such a combination. We made sour faces, still it was better than eating ten swallows of hillside, or pigs' feet soup we had been getting at B. III. And, of course, having our own spoon and bowl made eating much more normal.

We could rinse our dishes and wash ourselves too. Impatiently, I slipped into my new, flannel nightgown and kissed the members of our family good night. I climbed up and facing the wall, I felt contented. It seem appropriate to say a thanksgiving prayer and as long as I was at it, I asked God to help me face the days in the shadows of the "Cement Dragon." I could not remember the last time I had prayed so contentedly. Maybe having my own bed now gave me security, and even hope.

The whistle sounded early in the morning. We heard someone say, "*Aufstehen*," meaning, "Get up." Carefully, I touched my blanket, wondering whether being in a bed was a reality. I said my morning prayer and felt good about myself.

"Good morning, my children, it's time to get up," Magda said gently.

"Please, Mommie, let us sleep a little longer," Edit said, in a soft, sleepy tone.

"This is not a hotel, my child," Magda replied. Lilla crawled down from her bed and lay beside Edit, and they pretended to be snoozing. The rest of us stretched and yawned, not yet ready to face whatever was planned for us. Soon we heard another whistle and "Zahlappell."

"Zahlappell yourself," Sarah grunted. We dressed in haste and rushed out to the lines. We had hardly time to lace our shoes when the counting started.

"What the devil do they want from us this early?" Lena complained. "It is practically dark."

"I guess they want us to have an early breakfast," Regina said.

"Knowing their garbage, I would rather sleep," Victoria said, and yawned.

Steaming pots were brought into the dimly lit corridor and we each received a full cup of substitute coffee. We were told after finishing our drink to put the mugs back on the top of our bunks. Those who had to use the toilet should do so in a hurry, others, line up again.

Everyone had to go and the lines seemed endless at the toilets. I told Sarah since we had to wait, we should wash ourselves. I ran back for our soap and towels while Sarah held the line at the toilet. First, I washed myself with the soap which had no foam, then Sarah took her turn at the wash basins. After finishing, she joined me, and said it was nice to have a partner. It was our turn at the toilet, but we had no tissue to wipe ourselves. We talked about getting a bundle of leaves from the bushes at the next chance we would get. I put back our soap and towels on the top of our blankets. Feeling refreshed, we rushed back to the lines. I told Sarah that tomorrow we should get up much earlier to avoid the long waiting.

We were told to move out into the yard, where we shivered during another counting. They marched us through a gate near the narrow guardhouse, large enough to hold only one soldier, and crossed the tracks. Somewhere in the trees the birds were singing. Blue and black haze drifted from the forest, and the scent of pine trees hung in the clean air. We reached the gate of the factory.

The door was wide open. The foul smell of the fire-spewing dragon blew into our faces. Cautiously, we proceeded, gaping around, bumping into each other, as nobody wanted to enter. The Aufseherinen used their muscles to push us into a wide aisle, that branched out into several narrower aisles. We saw machines of various shapes and sizes, crouching silently like ugly monsters, ready to spring and devour us. The smell of oil hovered over everything.

Gretl came into the main aisle and told us that the “Meisters” were coming individually to fetch us for their compartments. We should obey them as if they were

soldiers.

The Meisters, mostly older men of various dimensions, approached our lines and looked us over like one looks at some merchandise at a bazaar. They picked out the women they liked.

I was selected and grabbed by a fish-faced, bow-legged, middle-aged man with a battered, black, captain's hat. I hoped he would like the rest of our family so we could stay close together. He picked only Edit, Lilla and Sarah. A tall, lean master pulled Lena, Magda and Victoria into his compartment adjacent to the one where we stood. Regina was selected by a third master and led further down the aisle. Magda said after we were settled, she would see to it that Regina was brought into our compartment.

Meister Fishface motioned with sign language for us to follow him. Once in the aisle, he pulled each of us by our dresses to the strangely shaped machines, and gestured with his hand to stand still, like one tells a dog.

Victoria stood only an arm's length away from me. She asked what I thought we were going to make?

"Mouse traps," I said, and grinned. Her Meister put his index finger over his narrow mouth and signaled for me to keep quiet.

I stood in front of a steel octopus. While examining its various tentacles, a new group of women was led into the compartment. One of them was placed in front of the machine where I was standing. Now, all the machines had two workers.

The Meister came over to me and touched each gadgets. With hand signals he explained how to operate them. He pointed at me and pointed at the machine, indicating it was my turn to try.

"This is too complicated, would you mind explaining it to me again?" I said in "Hoch Deutsch." His narrow eyes widened and his flat, expressionless face took on a new color.

"*Donnerwetter*, " Why didn't you tell me you could speak German?"

"You didn't ask," I said, and felt right away that our relationship started out on the wrong foot.

He shrugged. "You be damned," he said, and went over the details. Even if he would have explained it to me in Hungarian, it still would have been beyond my comprehension. The meat grinder was the most complicated machine I had ever worked with. I tried though, and did it wrong. He became furious and cursed me between his teeth; nevertheless he repeated the instructions, and I understood. He told me, since I knew how to work the machine I should explain it to the other "*Mensch*." This word as far as I understood, didn't mean woman, girl or female.

Another worker stepped beside me and I began. "It is very simple. First, press the starter button, then release the lever, like this." The lever didn't budge. I tried it again. "Release the lever with your left hand, and with your right hand insert a piece of pipe, like this, and then start the spinning lever. Push the blade forward until it touches the spinning pipe. Lean over lever No. 1, no, No. 2. Oh, now, I'm telling you all wrong," I said, with much embarrassment.

She smiled. "Take it easy. I already know how to handle such machines. Have you heard of the Selles factories?"

"Yes, the one that makes farming machines."

"I'm Bobby Selles. I have seen many machines like these before. Watch me," she said, and breezed through the entire procedure.

"Don't feel too bad, in a few days you, too, will be an expert."

I was thinking of Tibor. I would tell him my newly found trade and compare my machine's technique with his.

The Meister strolled down among the rows and when he returned, he told us to take turns running the machine, for one hour each.

“How do we know when the hour is up?” I risked the question.

“Dummkopf,” he growled, and pointed at the clock on a wide beam, just over our heads.

“Hey, a clock,” I exclaimed with gusto.

“What’s the matter with you? Haven’t you ever seen a clock?” He wrinkled his bony nose. I thought he resembled a carp.

“Not recently,” I informed him. He grunted something that could have meant stupid or ignorant, his dialect was new to me. He walked away, shaking his head. I would call him Meister Carpface, I thought, and spread quickly the news about the clock. I could see the pleasure on Magda’s face, as she relayed the news.

I was working about half an hour when I noticed there was more oil in my hands than on the machine. I found a small rag near the machine, grabbed it and wiped off some of the oil. I continued working until my hour was up and Mrs. Selles took over. While she worked, I visited Edit, Lilla and Sarah. They had the identical machines like mine and they, too, were struggling to learn how to operate them. Magda and Victoria worked on different kinds of machines. They used spinning power drills to engrave grooves into tiny screws. Their machines were running fast, and they had to be rather alert to pull their fingers away when the drill began to spin. Oil was spouting at their fingers continuously. The drill retreated automatically. Magda said only turning off the power would stop it.

I ventured into Regina’s compartment. She worked on a sanding machine. Her job was simple. After exchanging a few words I returned to Magda’s machine. Lena stood by, waiting for her turn. I asked if she wanted to go with me to get acquainted with the factory. We walked among the aisles and located the toilet area behind a wall. It had a big cement block, sunken into the ground with narrow holes in it, just like those which Genya called the “cloacal hole” during our last day at B.III. In addition, faucets

were attached to the side walls. We saw no toilet paper holders or paper.

An elderly, heavysset woman stood by. She said her name was Mrs. Katz. She used to be a hat maker in Gyor. Her job was to make sure nobody fell into the holes or mess up the place.

“Some job,” Lena remarked.

“I’m glad that the walls will hide us.”

Mrs. Katz said it was one thing to let the prisoners and guards see us with our panties down, but it was different for the civilians to see. I told her things were getting better, still I wished we had toilet paper. She said at least we could wash our behinds.

We returned to our compartments and took our turn. Carpfacer was inspecting the pipes I had worked on and shook his head with dismay. What did he expect from me anyhow, perfection, after such a brief practice?

Another hour of work passed. I was more relaxed and produced better pipes. While waiting again, I browsed around more thoroughly. I saw a woman sitting at a desk. She wore a two-piece, gray dress. I envied her instantly because of her thick, long, blond hair.

She had a calendar on her desk. Now I knew the date: the second of August. I leaned over and told my discovery to Magda, who again spread the news.

At nine o'clock, the factory's whistle sounded. The Meister motioned for us to stop our machines, and turn off the lights. He walked out into the main aisle, and joined the other Meisters who already were sitting on wooden boxes, eating salt pork with marmalade and dark bread and drinking coffee. Even though I would prefer to eat something else, I gaped at them hungrily, and wished they would give me a bite. With each swallow they took, I swallowed my saliva, and decided to save a slice of bread from my evening meal for the morning break.

At nine-fifteen the Meisters returned. Meister Carpfacer explained that in case of

an air raid we should stop our machines and turn off the lights before leaving for shelter. "Shelter" was a new word in our vocabulary.

We worked again. I listened to the rhythmical sounds of the machines. Some roared, some hissed, others puff-puffed loudly. Some were giants, some were miniature machines sitting on top of low tables. Some cut long pipes, others cut tiny screws or hollowed the pipes. I couldn't even guess what they were used for.

Five minutes before twelve we were told to stop the machines, turn off the lights, and line up at the center aisle. From there we were led back to the barracks.

The day was warm and sunny. The barrack helpers, the doctor and nurses were sitting outside in front of the barracks. They greeted us and asked about our work. We had to admit it was bearable and we would easily survive six hours of work until the end of the war, providing it would soon be over. Magda said she would rather work than sit idly and starve.

After a bowl of salt-free turnip soup, roll call was established. We were made to line up in alphabetical order. Some shuffling, pushing and arranging ensued, and each of us was given a strip of white cloth, with a number written on it. One of the Aufseherinen, who looked as if she needed a shave, explained this was only a temporary number. We feared perhaps the permanent one would be tattooed onto our arms. Berta received too many inquiries, and decided to ask the Aufseherin what the permanent number would look like. She said it would be black plastic. That made us feel much better, although now we were numbered like convicts. Yet, on such a lovely day as this was, even that didn't make a dent in my light mood.

"How are you, 424?" I asked Lilla.

"Just fine, 409," she replied.

"You idiots, you always find something to joke about. I feel as if I were in a penal colony and you act as if you were at a May Day picnic," Victoria growled.

After everyone had her tag pinned up, the Haupscharfuhrer made a speech regarding our conduct. He added a new word to our vocabulary. He called us, "*Haftlings*."

Berta gathered some courage and asked what the word meant. She was told it was used for Jewish prisoners only, and carried none of the privileges agreed upon for prisoners of war subject to provision of the Geneva Convention. He enumerated a long list of "Verboten" items.

"Sex is verboten?" a teenager exclaimed behind me. Her mother gave her a gentle push with her elbow, while the rest of us laughed.

The day ended with Zahlappell and we were given oxenrueben soup, the main diet of German cows. It contained a few pieces of potatoes and slivers of some suspicious-looking meat. After the meal we were told those selected to work the second shift should line up. The group, Lena included, was led back to the factory. Magda vowed to remedy that as soon as possible. Since no further orders were given, we relaxed.

I went to the washroom and attempted to scrub the oil deposit off my body. I used up too much soap, and not knowing when I would receive the next bar, I became worried. While washing up, I overheard that neither Berta nor her helpers had to go into the factory. I wished I had been more assertive the day before and volunteered to be a helper, but the helpers I had seen in B.III had given me the shivers.

Back in our room, I found Regina lying on her bed. Her face was pale and her breathing labored. Victoria accused her of faking and trying to get out of work. The rest of my group was honestly concerned about Regina as if she were truly our sister. Magda held her hand and insisted on going to see the doctor right away. Regina assured her she was only tired and with some rest she would feel better in the morning.

At sunrise, the whistle sounded. Magda got up and looked for Lena. She peeked out to the corridor and asked the helpers if they had seen Lena. Bozsi said that those who worked the night shift wouldn't return until six, when the day shift would go into the factory. Magda was shocked to hear about the twelve-hour shift, and moaned.

I rushed into the bathroom and was luckier than the day before. I had my turn at the faucet and the toilet, without waiting. Through the open windows I could see the guard marching by. He had red hair and a long, red gash cut his left cheek into two. Once in awhile, he glanced into the bathroom.

The pine-scented, fresh morning air gave me the needed lift. Magda was not in our room when I returned. Sarah said she had taken Regina to see the doctor. They returned soon. Magda was fuming. The nurse told her the doctor did not arise that early and had sent them away.

After Zahlappell and coffee, we were chased into the factory. Regina's walk was unsteady, but she didn't complain.

Chapter 2

We arrived at the factory five minutes to six. By the six o'clock whistle we were led to our machines, and the night shift had returned to the barracks.

Meister Carpface checked to see if I could still remember what I had learned the previous day. He said he would be willing to show me once more, but from then on I had to know what I was doing. He took me to the adjacent compartment, near the big machines, and told me to pick up a crate of metal pipes and carry it over to my machine. I tried to lift it. I thought my guts would fall out because the crate was so heavy. I told him I had to drag it, or ask someone to help me. At first he swore, then motioned to Sarah to come over. Both of us were panting while carrying the crate.

The Meister brought over an empty crate and told me that every day I had to fill up eight of them with finished material, or else I would be punished. I had no idea how I could do that or what the punishment would be if I didn't.

I worked slowly, watching the clock. Beams of light broke through the glass ceiling and gave life to the morose environment.

Sarah stopped by my machine and mentioned between yawns that she had heard we were making ammunition. I picked up one of the small pipes which I had finished and told her how awfully ironic our lives turned out to be if we were forced to help our enemy. Now I really understood why Tibor despised his job. With each piece we finished, we put our freedom one step backward. I told Sarah I would rather work slower and take the punishment. She said I was wrong to harm myself. With God's help the Nazis would not have a chance to use these things.

"Wouldn't it be nice to know how far the Allied Armies have advanced in

France?" I asked.

Lilla joined us and said she heard our camp was located in Westphalia. As far as I could remember geography we could be close to the French border. This was an important discovery.

Again, at nine o'clock the Meisters had their break. Instead of watching and drooling, Magda and I walked over to Regina. She was surrounded by concerned women, who probably noticed how sickly she looked. I asked Regina how she felt, but she only smiled. Magda touched Regina's forehead, but she didn't smile.

Our lunch break came at twelve-thirty. We were chased back to the barracks. My arms were so sore that I could hardly hold the bowl of soup. The thin soup gave me a full feeling, but I doubted it would supply me any energy.

While we gulped down our soup, Regina ate slowly. I saw how difficult it was for her to lift the spoon. Victoria told her to hurry up.

The minute we finished, the soldiers made us get in line by shoving, pushing and kicking us to make sure we would be back at the factory work by one o'clock.

During the afternoon the Meister sat down frequently. We were forbidden to rest even for a moment. By five o'clock I was starving and my legs ached so terribly that I wondered how long it would take before they refused to support me, and would move someplace else forever. I would have to sit on my buttock and sell pencils in front of the church. At five minutes before six the Meister gave me a rag to clean up the machine before the night shift arrived. Although I was exhausted, I still did a thorough clean-up job so Mrs. Selles wouldn't think I was messy.

We dragged ourselves back to the barracks and stood one hour for Zahlappell. The helpers were unaccustomed to their new job and the count was inaccurate. They had to do it over several times. Magda said angrily that she would be glad to stay home and do a fast and decent counting and the helpers could go into the

factory instead. Jollie Kantor, a helper from barrack No. 3, heard Magda's outburst, and warned she would be punished for talking back.

"Jesus Christ," Lilla cried out. "It took you only three days to be like Genya at B.III."

Magda drank the coffee and ate the bread in a hurry, then took Regina by the hand and rushed with her to the hospital. We sat at the edge of the bottom bunks and waited. Five minutes later Magda returned, alone. Her face was drawn, her eyes moist. She said Doctor Peltzer examined Regina and kept her there. She would have to take her belongings to the hospital. Magda gathered Regina's things and said the doctor was amazed how she could work a full shift with such a high temperature.

We accompanied Magda to the hospital, and sat outside Regina's window for the rest of the evening, trying to convince each other she would become well again, despite the meager amount of available medication. Sarah suggested we pray for Regina.

"I wouldn't ask the help of that Old Bearded if my dog were sick," Victoria grunted.

"Maybe you should. It was your fault that Regina became ill," Lilla said. "She took her dress off to cover you, remember?"

Victoria jumped up and raised her fist, ready to strike, when the doctor appeared and asked which one of us was related to Regina. We all stood up. Victoria's eyes shot angry glances at us. She must have thought we were making fun of her. Sarah explained that we loved Regina as much as if she were our real sister. Victoria turned away, hung her head, pulled in her shoulders and told the doctor she was Regina's cousin.

"We know you'll try your best, Doctor Peltzer," Sarah said.

The doctor advised us to return to our room and rest. None of us could sleep. Listless and plagued with worry, we shifted in our beds. Lilla climbed down to Edit and they whispered late into the night.

Next morning before going to work we ran to the hospital. Nurse Lonka wouldn't let us in. She said Regina was still sleeping. When the nurse went into the bathroom, we sneaked in. Regina's face was unusually dark. She breathed heavily and cried out in her sleep. We came out and held onto each other. I felt Lilla's hand tremble. I was terribly worried.

"Oh, God," Sarah sighed, and soon we were weeping. Magda stopped Valie, the other nurse, and asked if she knew the nature of Regina's illness. But the nurse didn't know. We had to rush to work, and returned to the hospital during the noon break even before we ate.

Nurse Lonka told us Regina had been taken into the town's hospital for examination. We hoped she would be treated as a human being and not as a Haftling.

After work we hurried to the hospital. Only Victoria was allowed to see Regina. When she returned, she said angrily that Regina failed to recognize her. Several women from room No. 30 gathered and inquired how our sister was coming along. Berta advised everybody to pray for Regina's recovery. Victoria resented it. She said they were acting as if Regina were already dead. If the Old Bearded up there would have wanted to help, he wouldn't have allowed the Germans to drag us into this hell.

Nurse Lonka asked if Victoria was pagan. Magda begged her forgiveness since Victoria was under such terrible tension. The nurse shook her head and turned away. Magda said the rest of us were going to pray.

Again, we lay awake that night. The pain I felt in my swollen legs and sore arms were minute compared with the pain I felt in my heart. It was worse to worry alone, so I crawled down to Sarah and we cried in the darkness.

Next morning we were told Regina was feeling a little better. The family appeared to be somewhat relieved, but Edit pulled me aside and reminded me that my brother felt so much better the day before he died. Edit and I sobbed. She complained about chest pains. I put my arms around her.

At nine-twenty the air raid sirens sounded. The German factory workers rushed to their tall, cone-shaped, concrete air raid shelter. Our guard chased us down into the bunkers located behind barrack No. 3. The bunkers were narrow tunnels beneath mounds of earth.

Two nurses carried Regina down on a chair and we stood beside her in ankle-deep, slimy water. She was weak, unable to hold herself straight. The nurses were supporting her on both sides. I touched her shoulder gently, afraid she might break. Her fragile face was like a bruised white rose after a hailstorm, and was so pale it shone in the semi-darkness. Her deep-seated eyes were encircled by dark shadows and had no sparkle. Her cheekbones protruded like a skeleton. Only her spirit remained unaltered. She asked if any of us was ready for an English lesson. She smiled, her voice weak that we had to bend down to her.

We attempted to smile, and shook our heads. It was difficult to talk while we were choking from tears.

"Our guardian angels will descend with parachutes. How are you going to greet them?" Regina asked softly.

"If it is an Englishman, we say, 'How do you do?' If an American, we say, 'How are you?'" I said, and shook so badly that I made ripples in the water.

"Very good, very good," Regina whispered, her voice trailing away. We moved

closer to her, hoping if we filled the space maybe the *Maar Hamoves* (Angel of Death) couldn't reach Regina.

"Altogether now, 'Thank you, soldiers, for our liberation,'" Regina instructed, still smiling.

"Those are hard words to remember. You'd better give us some more lessons," Edit acted her part and turned away, her shoulders shaking.

We didn't hear any bombing and the air raid ended too soon. Regina was carried back to the hospital. She raised her arm and waved as they carried her through the door. We waved to her in response.

The Aufseherinen and the soldiers rushed us with their usual brutal methods to get back to the factory, fearing they would lose the war if we started working a moment too late. With our sore feet, just to walk was an accomplishment.

At the factory we paid no attention to our work. We strolled between the rows, getting back to our posts only when we saw our Meisters approach. We had many visitors. Sarah said she never realized how many women cared about Regina.

When our guard was changed, Nurse Lonka took it upon herself to come into the factory to inform us that Frau Weltner, a German civilian doctor, would be arriving shortly and would give Regina the specific medication she needed to get well. Several hours later, when we returned from work, we heard the news that the Weltner refused to bring the medicine. She said it was too costly to waste on a Haftling.

Now we knew the truth. Even the Aufseherinen shook their heads as if they, too, were shocked, yet none spoke up. Regina's fate had been sealed. We wanted so much to stay at her side.

The soldiers chased everyone down to the bunkers and made us carry out the polluted water in our soup bowls. After that was done, we were told to line up, and

each of us got a long, red stripe painted on the back of our dresses. Since our hair was growing, they feared someone would mistake us for civilians. Black plastic tags were distributed, engraved with the word, "Haftling," and our number.

Edit said she would frame and hang her tag in her living room. Lilla said she would make it a brooch, and Victoria said she would throw hers onto the first garbage dump she saw. The red paint was still wet when we were dismissed, and we hurried to the hospital. Nurse Lonka stopped us in the corridor saying Regina was asleep. She said only a miracle would save her. Victoria told her where to shove her miracle.

We staggered back to our room and gathered around the table to pray. Lilla said she wished she knew a Jewish prayer for Regina, but I told her to tell God what she felt. Surely He would accept it just the same. Lilla put her hands together as her lips moved silently, and tears rolled down her cheeks. Such a large crowd gathered in our room that the door had to be kept open. The women prayed even in the corridor.

Victoria didn't pray. Her eyes were fixed on a spot on the table. She said God was on the side of the Nazis.

After awhile the crowd disbursed and we lay down. I felt so tired as if I, alone, had built that huge concrete air raid shelter.

With the first light of the morning, the news arrived that Regina had died.

Victoria's expression changed as if she had been given a new face. Her features hardened. Her eyes turned dry and glassy. Her voice lowered, she muttered frequently, avoiding facing us. While we cried, she couldn't. Her tears were poisoning her on the inside.

I wanted to tell her that we shared her sorrow, that we felt a great loss, and that we would stand by and help her bear her pain, as if she had been our blood

relative. I wished to say many comforting words, but one harsh look from Victoria made the words freeze on my lips.

We had to go to work that morning, even Victoria. Our machines drowned out our weeping. I reached to my face once in awhile, and with my oily hand I wiped my tears. It was no use; I just let them flow. I got an awful headache and made most of my material the wrong size. Two heavysset, young women civilians, who I hadn't seen previously, came to my machine. They spoke an unfamiliar language. One of them measured my pipes and shook her head disapprovingly. I didn't care.

During the nine o'clock pause, we talked over how we could arrange Regina's funeral. It was a frightening feeling to know how valueless our lives had been as far as the Nazis were concerned. The question of God's justice floated through our thoughts. Why did she have to die? She was an angel on earth. I remembered how hard it had been for me to accept my brother's death. I felt it should have been me. He was a much better person. I recalled how our rabbi tried to explain to my parents God's intentions. I disagreed then, and I disagreed now. I kept my feelings to myself.

Magda reasoned the Germans would allow Regina's body to remain in the camp out of respect for Sunday, but on Monday, when our shift would be changed, we couldn't see any reason why the Hauptscharfuhrer should block our efforts to take care of the funeral arrangements on our own time. Magda asked Berta to inquire if there were a Jewish cemetery in the vicinity. Sarah educated Lilla about the Jewish burial procedures.

Orthodox Jewish women from barrack No. 3 offered to prepare Regina's body for burial in accordance with Jewish custom. Magda expressed our gratitude, although one of the women said there was no need to thank them as they were performing a *mitzvah*, a good deed.

Every one of us, with the exception of Victoria, was involved. During the nine o'clock pause she sat alone in the middle of the aisle, stone like, and made no sound. After the pause was over I asked Victoria to accompany me to the toilet. I knew the place was empty at this time, and I wanted to talk to her undisturbed. She agreed to come with me.

The toilet was quiet, even old Mrs. Katz, whose job was to keep an eye on things, wasn't present. I grabbed Victoria's arm and pulled her near the wall.

"I know we are strangers," I began, and leaned against the wall, "but circumstances make me feel as if there is a bond between us."

She didn't pay any attention to what I was saying, instead fixing her eyes on the most unlikely spot in the entire place, the foul-smelling toilet holes.

"I understand how you feel," I said. "I lost my brother. We had the best hospital, doctors and medication available, yet his life couldn't be saved."

"What are you trying to bring out?" Victoria interrupted. Her nostrils were quivering and she drew away from me.

"I have a feeling that you are blaming yourself for Regina's death. She did remove her dress to protect you, but that wasn't the cause of her illness. This life, these inhuman conditions, and cruelty made her sick. Maybe you are afraid to face her parents. Please, get rid of the guilt feeling right now and throw it into that stinking hole. It wasn't your fault."

Victoria faced the floor now. I lifted up her chin and made her to look at me. "Am I correct?"

She lowered her eyes. "You were all so kind to Regina. I was the only one to accuse her of faking her illness." And she kept repeating, "What am I going to tell her parents?"

"You don't have to tell them anything. We are going to be with you and explain.

We loved Regina and we love you too.” She raised her arms and we embraced each other. Soon I felt warm teardrops wetting my shoulder.

“After my brother’s death our rabbi told my parents that God takes to Himself those He loves.”

Victoria said she never believed in God’s existence. She had to admit, though, the way we lived here was more brutal, more cruel than Regina’s fine nature would be able to bear. Now she didn’t suffer any longer.

She walked out, crying. Her features softened and she relaxed.

Lilla came over to me and asked what I had done to Victoria that had seemed to change her. After I told her, Lilla wanted to apologize for the nasty things she had said to Victoria, and walked over to her. When Lilla returned, she was smiling with tears in her eyes.

I felt better about myself and to keep my mind off the unchangeable sorrow. I looked around the factory. Again I noticed the strange women in our compartment. From their clothing and long hair it was apparent they weren’t Haftlings like ourselves.

One of them, a heavyset, blond woman with wide shoulders, wide hips, and no waistline, stopped at my machine. She had a gadget in her hand, and picked up one of the pipes I had finished and measured it. She shook her head and said in broken German that I was making a mistake. Now I wanted to know more about her and asked what country she had come from. She told me her name was Hania and she and her friend, Pannina, were Russians. They hated the Germans. Pannina had tried to escape. She was shot and lost the index finger on her left hand. Pannina showed me the stub left of her finger. I shuddered at the sight. Hania told me the third girl, Jadviga, who walked as if she had eaten sour apples, was the Polish mechanic, and she would repair my machine. After inspecting several of the

pipes, they walked away, arm in arm, swaying their heavy hips.

Soon, Jadviga trotted toward me like a peacock. She wore a faded, pink satin turban. Her over-rouged face shone, accentuated by her full lips puckered as if she were expecting a kiss. She flirted with the Meister across the aisle, but he ignored her. Reluctantly, without a sound, she motioned for me to move over. After making an adjustment on my machine, she left.

Later, several young men walked up to the huge, idling machines at the compartment next to mine. They wore dark brown uniforms and spoke a language that sounded Italian to me.

Jadviga also must have noticed the men, because she returned frequently and in a high-pitched voice, asked how I was doing. She bent over my machine as if she were actually concerned, but her eyes were on the young men. However, by not paying attention to what she was doing, her intricate tools fell out of her apron's pocket. She grumbled while picking them up.

During the noon break, when Lena was supposed to be sleeping, she was waiting for us. Lena said the Weltner had summoned her and asked to supply information about dear Regina. Lena only knew her approximate age and that Regina was a doctor of science. She mentioned her home town, but didn't know her mother's maiden name.

Victoria went to the hospital to fill in the missing information. While she was gone, Lena remarked that she had noticed a difference in Victoria's appearance. Lilla explained what had transpired in the factory's toilet. Since then Victoria was bearing up much better, and was able to cry.

Victoria returned and told us that the Orthodox women had washed Regina and dressed her in a clean, white nightgown. None of the women admitted doing it. The same group was holding a vigil all night. Victoria was crying again.

Back at the factory so many women approached us to express their sympathy that the Meister warned if any more entered the compartment, he would send the guard for the Hauptscharfuhrer and ask him to punish us. I explained the reason why the women were visiting. He grunted and told me to beware and walked away. As I saw several women turning into our aisle, I rushed to the girl who worked near the entrance of our department, and asked her to explain about the Meister's threat. From then on we had no more visitors. Only when we were in the toilet did the women offer their condolences.

Jadviga returned to my machine and asked if I knew how to speak Italian. I shook my head and asked her why. She pointed at the young men nearby and said she wished to talk to them. The Italian men were too busy to notice her. Their Meister, a bald giant, urged them to feed the long pipes into the machines, and cut them into the size of the material I was using.

Jadviga picked up a finished pipe and threw it at one of the Italians and ducked behind my machine. The man turned toward me and smiled. I was bewildered and scared. Jadviga stood up. "Did he look?" she asked, and giggled.

"Yes, he did, but you'd better go and talk to Victoria. She could teach you to speak Italian before you get me into trouble." I thought Victoria would also benefit by getting her mind off her sorrow even if only for a short while.

Victoria must have taught a few sentences to the Polish girl because she returned and tossed another pipe at the same Italians. This time she didn't duck. The young man, whom she had hit, came to my machine. She repeated the few words which she had learned and while they talked, he kept looking around cautiously, like a bird when pecking in the vegetable garden. When he saw the Meister, he ran away.

"These Germans are very hard on the Italian prisoners," Jadviga said, "but I'm

going to be friendly with Mario.” She winked and strolled away.

That night the Hauptscharfuhrer made a long speech about fraternizing with the Italians. He warned if any of us was caught talking to them, he would have her hair shaved off. By this time our hair no longer stood up like bristles on a brush, but began to lean downward. Personally, I would rather not talk to anybody than become bald again.

More women came to our room after dinner to express their sympathy. We excused ourselves because we wanted to see Regina for the last time. However, only Victoria was allowed to see her. She cried freely when she returned to our room and said she wished she knew how to thank those wonderful women who had done such a decent thing to someone unable to thank them.

I told Victoria that my father used to say that the biggest *mitzvah* was accomplished when people did things for others without expecting or receiving any gratitude.

Regina’s meager belongings were put into the stock room. Only her shoes which she had brought from home were given to Victoria. She would take them back to Regina’s parents. We gazed down on our own shoes, thinking how soon it would be before they became the only souvenir which our parents would receive.

In the morning we arose early and went to the hospital barrack. Three women carried Regina’s body in a blanket. A crowd gathered. When we arrived, they made way for us as we were about to accompany our dear friend and sister on her last journey. Victoria was in the first line with Sarah. Magda, Lilla, Edit and I followed them closely, until we reached the guardhouse. A horse-driven wagon waited outside the fence across the railroad tracks. The women walked out of the gate and placed the body into the bottom of the wagon, and returned behind the fence. We were just about to cross the tracks and wait for the wagon to roll, when two of the

soldiers halted us with the butt of their rifles. One of them asked, "Where the hell do you think you are going?"

"To the cemetery," Magda replied, bravely.

"Los, los, back to your barrack," the other soldier shouted, and they chased us all the way to the door. Through the fence we would see Aufseherin Gertrude instructing Victoria to sit up in the wagon, next to Regina's body. Victoria had trouble climbing up, and when she finally made it, she looked back at us with horror stamped on her face. The soldiers locked the gate. The horse pulled out slowly with the pitiful load and we waved at the strange cortege.

"Have peace, Regina, and may your soul be bound with those of Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah," I uttered, and we wept.

We stayed outside, sat on the grass and cried on each other's shoulder. Berta joined us and after a few more words of sympathy, she urged us to go inside to rest as that night was going to be our first night shift. We needed all our strength.

We obeyed her, but I lay awake in my bunk, imagining sitting beside Victoria in the Haftling hearse. I remembered when as a child, I would sit in such a wagon and bounce with each turn of the wheel. The bounces Victoria must have experienced would leave a permanent scar on her soul.

The room was hot and stuffy. I wished I could slide down and talk to Sarah, when suddenly, little reddish bugs crawled out of the cracks of the wall and marched onto my blanket. "Bedbugs," I cried, and grabbed for my shoe. I smashed a couple of them right on the wall.

Sarah jumped up and hit her head on the slat beneath my straw sack.

"What's the matter with you?" she cried. "You really scared me."

I apologized and told her about the bedbugs. Soon the other sleepers awakened and were slapping the walls wildly. I scratched myself. My skin had

blisters as if I had been attacked by a family of monstrous mosquitoes. Poor Sarah fell back to sleep. I crawled out of bed, walked outside and lay on the grass.

On the other side of the fence, the guard, about my father's age, was pacing with a slight limp. When he saw me he nodded and smiled. I nodded back. Berta came by. She said Wilhelm was the only soldier who hadn't kicked any of us so far, and when we were liberated we will hang the others, and save only his life.

Berta was called into the barrack. I envied her for never having to go inside the dragon. She was clean and well-groomed. I gazed at the clear, blue sky, thinking if there is a heaven up there, Regina would soon find out. Maybe she already knew.

My stomach was growling and I felt hunger pains. At home the fall fruits were ripening. "Oh, plums, grapes and peaches," I sighed. Our new trees would bear fruit for the first time this year. My father predicted we wouldn't be there to see them. Oh, Father, where are you now?"

Time passed on the outside, and while I was soothing the bug bites with cool blades of grass, Victoria appeared. She waved to me. I got up and rushed toward her. She sat down on the first step of our barrack and put her head onto the palms of her hands. When I reached her she panted, "I can't talk now."

"You look like you've been running," I said. She nodded. I was about to sit down beside her when she uttered a horrendous curse. I jumped back quickly.

"How could you say such terrible things after your cousin's funeral?"

"What funeral? At Birkenau your ladybug received a more decent burial than poor Regina." She fumed awhile, then quieted down and told me the reason for her anger.

"A short distance from the gate, the civilian driver stopped the cart and Private Hans jumped up. He had a bicycle with him. He pushed me against Regina's body and made me hold his damn bicycle." She spoke fast with fury.

“The wooden planks of the wagon's bottom were bouncing on the cobblestones, and I bounced against her body with each bump. We drove down into an old neglected Jewish cemetery on the outskirts of the town. The driver pulled her body off with the blanket and tossed it into a pre-dug grave as if it had been a sack of potatoes. Then he pulled the blanket away. As Regina rolled in the grave, her gown slipped up and uncovered her barren body.” Victoria took a deep breath and gasped as if she were about to choke.

“The driver put the blanket behind his seat and drove away. The soldier handed me a shovel and made me fill the grave. He didn't even let me finish,” she wept.

“He told me to keep moving. I took a last look at the partially filled grave, and walked after the soldier. I saw many broken tombstones and neglected grave sites. On the outside of the cemetery Hans hopped on his bicycle and told me to follow him. He rode faster and faster, and I had to run through the town. That scum warned me not to step on the sidewalk because it was ‘verboden’ for Jews. I felt like a dog.”

I sat down beside her.

“Remember her grave, Victoria. Soon the war will be over and we are going to place dear Regina's body into a coffin and take her home with us and give her a decent burial.”

“I wish I could hang the Weltner on a tree, she is a killer,” she sighed and turned her attention to scraping the mud off her shoes. I walked into the barrack and came out with a cup of water. I asked Victoria to stand up so I could pour the water over her hands. She wanted to know why.

“It's a religious custom after returning from the cemetery. It implies that we are washing our hands from all guilt.”

Victoria's face turned pale. It must have touched a sore spot in her. She put out

her hands and mumbled something I couldn't understand, but I thought it better to let it pass. I poured the water. She let it flow between her fingers while her tears streamed down her cheeks.

"Thank you," she said, and I felt she meant more than thanking me for the water. I followed her to our room and brought out my towel and some soap, and ran to the bathroom before the crowd awoke for the next shift. There were only a few women in the bathroom, including Mrs. Katz and her teenage daughter, Anni, who were washing themselves. They both were naked. I cringed when I envisioned my mother standing there also, and I selected a faucet at the opposite end of the bathroom. When they walked over to me to express their sorrow over the loss of Regina, I lowered my eyes and avoided facing Mrs. Katz while she shook my hand. After they left I scrubbed myself with the coarse soap and cold water and listened to their conversation. As Anni complained about the red bumps she had on her skin, her mother examined them carefully. I wished there were someone to care about my bumps.

The window behind Mrs. Katz was wide open, and a soldier paced back and forth. At times he paused and glared at the naked women. When he looked toward me, I ducked behind the sink.

Mrs. Katz noticed and yelled out at the soldier in Hungarian, "Your mother should punch your eyes out for being disrespectful to an old woman."

"I'll come in and punch your eyes out, you old witch," the soldier yelled back in perfect Hungarian.

Mrs. Katz was startled at first. Then she regained control, and held her ground. "You traitor, you dirty, dirty traitor, you are one of those rats who volunteered to join the Nazis. Shame on you." She went to the window and spat at him.

"I'm going to break your wrinkled, old neck," hollered the soldier, and he rushed

away from the window.

“Mother, we’d better get away from here before he comes after us,” Anni warned. They picked up their belongings and hurried back to their room. The Hungarian soldier burst into every room of our barrack and woke up everybody, but he could not recognize either Mrs. Katz or Anni. He cursed in German and walked away, defeated.

I knocked on Berta’s door and told her the news that there was a Hungarian among the soldiers. She said he was undoubtedly brought in by the Hauptschar to spy on us. She explained she had shortened his name as in her opinion he was not a full person, and assured me she would promptly relay the news all over the camp about the Hungarian soldier.

While getting dressed, the girls in our room listened to the horrid details of Regina’s burial. They all vowed to take revenge on the Weltner.

At the factory I was worried. I never was up that late before, not even on Sylvester Night to celebrate before the New Year. My eyes were burning and it felt as if the machine was walking away from me. Edit behind me was nodding her head, and Lilla came forward often to keep her awake. Sarah moved further back, away from the machines, sat on an empty crate, and dozed off. The Meister sneaked behind her and before Lilla had a chance to warn Sarah, he kicked away the crate. Sarah fell face down on the oily cement floor. Luckily, she wasn’t hurt. She let out such a curse that everyone stopped working.

“You, too?” Magda said, and shook her head.

“It felt good, but I won’t do it again,” Sarah assured us. I was certain her face flushed, although it was too dark to see.

Victoria picked up a pipe and raised it as if it were a glass filled with wine. She said, “To your good health, sister.”

I wished we had an air raid then. The buzzing of the machines taunted us without stop. The factory was dark. The small lights over the machines had the appearance of fireflies sitting on dark branches. Shadows glided about as if they were the ghosts of dead ballet dancers. In my head a tune was stirring and I composed music to accompany the ballet. I would call it, "Dance on a hopeless night." Lean figures leaped out from behind the tall cutting machines, and disappeared into the fenced-in cage, where the finished material was deposited. Other ghosts, wearing gray chiffon gowns, danced between the slim, dark, drill presses, then, they too vanished. The press machines beat staccato and the hammer machine beat the rhythm. Other ghost dances fluttered and turned into the aisle, leading to the stockroom. 'Humm, humm,' the wide-mouthed cutter joined the symphony. The brown uniformed Italians mingled between the black-veiled, twirling women. A choir sang, "O Sole Mio." Nazi dancers skipped near the furnaces, hitting the steel supporting columns and hot sulfur steam hissed from the cracks of the cement floor. Russian girls tip-toed across the aluminum shavings, cymbals crashed, a choir sang "Volga, Volga." I could feel the movements, I could feel the vibration, the heat, I could feel the rhythm. I lifted my hands over my head, rose on my toes, ready to join the mad ballet.

I felt a tap on my shoulder. "Hey, are you all right?" Lilla asked. I lost the rhythm. The dancers disappeared, the orchestra stopped. I lowered my arms. "I'm all right," I said. "Just passing time with fantasies."

"Tell me about them, I'm so desperately tired." I told her about the ballet and the symphony.

"Silly child," Lilla shook her head, and returned to her machine.

At twelve-thirty, the soup cans were brought in and I remarked I had never eaten soup at night. Sarah reminded me as if I could forget, that I had never been a

Haftling either. After eating we sat and talked. Magda said the loss of Regina should bind us even closer. She made us promise to take care of each other more than we would ourselves. We gave our word.

The night dragged on miserably. I must have looked at the clock at least a hundred times, only that made it worse. Victoria said it was better at Birkenau where at least we could sleep at night.

The first sun rays of the new day broke through the glass panels of the roof. I turned off the overhead light and was pleased to see another sunrise. "Blessed be the One, who makes the distinction between day and night."

The morning Zählappell was held outdoors. The sparkling dew settled on the fence, like a long chain of crystal beads. I was glad there was still some beauty left that the Nazis could not destroy. I took deep breaths, trying to clean out from my lungs the foul fumes of the factory.

Lilla's legs were badly swollen. "What is so goddamn important about the Zählappell that they keep us standing for hours after a twelve-hour shift?" This was the first time I had heard her swear. I feared swearing was contagious.

Most of the women were too tired to wash up. I dragged myself and didn't go to bed until I felt I was reasonably clean. When I hit the straw sack, I was so exhausted that even the bedbugs couldn't keep me awake.

Our rest lasted no longer than a half-hour. We had an air raid and were chased down to the bunkers. Sarah gazed skyward and lamented, "Where were you during the night?" No sooner did we return to our beds when one of the helpers swung the door open. She needed six women to help her carry the bread from the German barracks. Shortly thereafter, Berta burst in and asked two women to come out and wash the corridor.

"This is ridiculous," Magda cried. "They should let us sleep. The next person

who comes through that door will get my shoe in her face.”

It was Magda’s bad luck that Ilse, the skinny blond Aufseherin, appeared at the door. We called her the “soccer player” because she kicked us as if we were a ball. The flying shoe hit Ilse in the mouth. She cried out loudly and demanded to know who threw the shoe. No one would tell. As punishment Ilse forbade all of us to pick up the day’s bread ration.

Magda said it was worth it.

As we arrived at the factory, Magda caught up with Lena, who was ready to leave for the barrack. She told Lena she would ask her Meister to switch Lena to our shift. Lena explained she would rather stay on the second shift as there were fewer women at the food line and at the bathroom. Also, it was more quiet in the room. Magda agreed with her sister’s reasoning.

The second night shift was easier to bear, because we had two long air raids. The Germans rushed in panic to their shelter, but we were smiling. Meister Carpface said in passing that if we were the targets of the bombing, we would be crying instead.

“You ‘*buta lofasz*,’” Victoria remarked in Hungarian, “we are only a few steps away from the factory. Even the best and the most accurate bomber wouldn’t miss us if they aimed at the factory.”

Despite brutal urging, none of us wanted to go down to the bunkers, and the guards were in such a hurry to reach their own bunker that they decided to let us get hit in the barracks. The problem arose when Kato Fogas awoke inside and heard us coming. She warned us not to go to our rooms because we would wake up the workers.

Magda argued, “How come, nobody cares about us when we try to sleep?” However, we tiptoed to our rooms and lay on our beds until the air raid was over.

After the raid Meister Carpface, who obviously recalled only one word which sounded German from Victoria's remark, approached Magda and asked what "buta lofasz" meant. Magda said seriously that it meant, "old lady." The rest of us laughed. The Meister asked several other women in the adjacent compartment what it meant. Someone told him the truth — "stupid horse penis." He walked from compartment to compartment and warned each of the Meisters to watch out for this specific word. Then he returned to us. He reprimanded Magda for misinterpreting the words, and threatened to wash Victoria's mouth with gasoline, and light it with a match.

After he was gone, Magda said the swear words the Meisters used were far worse than "lofasz."

During the remainder of the night Victoria complained of feeling sick. In the morning Lilla didn't give her a choice; she dragged her to the hospital. Lilla returned alone with the bad news that Victoria had hepatitis. She said there was a room full of women with similar symptoms. Again, the family gathered in fear. We visited Victoria, but we weren't allowed to go inside. We only saw her at the window. Victoria said she didn't mind being sick. At least she was exempt from pulling the lousy night shift.

She also said the rest of the hospital rooms were almost filled with women with skin diseases, swollen legs, and other work-related illnesses. But mostly the patients had stomach ailments. That was understandable considering the kind of food we had to eat.

In addition to "Hillside" soup which was similar to that we received in Birkenau, made with weeds and crabgrass juice, and "pig's feet soup," which no decent Hungarian pig would be caught dead putting his feet into this kind of slop, we were given "Lysol soup." Once a week the big soup cans were cleaned with a

disinfectant, and the German cooks would leave a residue of it in our cans, to make our lives more miserable.

During one night shift, Magda made her Meister taste the Lysol soup. In response, the Meister sent a note to the Hauptscharfuhrer, asking how he expected us to stay well and work with such a "*ferstunkene*" soup?

The Hauptscharfuhrer sent him a note, saying, he didn't tell the Meister how to run the factory, and the Meister shouldn't tell him how to run the camp. And we were given "*ferstunkene*" soup again.

To add to our list of nuisances, we had to punch time cards upon entering and leaving the factory, just like the civilian workers. I remarked perhaps they were going to pay us. We did receive a pair of new, drab gray overalls to be worn over our dresses. A long red stripe was painted on the back of the overalls. This new addition to our wardrobe allowed us to wash our dresses and hang them up to dry while wearing only the overalls. And we could finally wash our panties too, although we had no hot water or laundry soap.

One night the Meister walked over to me and remarked what an ugly group of gypsies we were. Look who is talking, I thought. His face was so ugly, that if he had looked into a bowl of fresh milk he would have turned it sour. If he had looked at a pregnant cow she would throw her calf prematurely. The man had large, flapping elephant ears, a short nose, sheered at the tip and pushed upward. When it rained he had to look downward to keep the rain out of his nostrils. For his eyes, he seemed to have stolen the buttons off a cabaret comedian's high buttoned shoes. To complete the picture, his stomach hung over his belt and his legs were crooked. He always smelled of naphthalene as if he were afraid the moths would eat up his skimpy hair. And he had the nerve to call *us* ugly.

"Can any of you read or write?" he asked me. I laughed and pointed at a woman

behind Magda and told him she knew how to read and write only in five languages.

“How about that puny one?” he pointed at Angie Morgenblatt.

I was about to ask if he knew what “atom” means, but I changed my mind. Angie could have gotten into trouble if the Germans knew about her education, and about her scientist father who worked with the Allies. I only said that she, too, could read and write. He asked one question after the other about our education, but soon he became aggravated. I guessed he hoped to find out that we were all illiterate, or perhaps he thought I was making up things to impress him. Stepping over to Lilla, he repeated the same questions about our education, and when receiving the same answer, he shook his head and mumbled some strange-sounding words. He must have asked Lilla about my education because he often returned to check the pipes I produced. One morning at dawn, when returning from the toilet, I stopped to talk with Sarah. My back was turned to him. Suddenly he charged forward, grabbing me by my overalls, and lugged me back to my machine with a final shove.

A little later, I recalled a story from my childhood about the mice who decided to hang a bell from the cat’s neck to warn when the cat was approaching. In like manner, I made up a signal for us to use. In my cat-and-mouse gambit, we hit a pipe against the body of our machine to signal impending doom when seeing the Meisters prowling nearby.

Still, there was one advantage about working the night shift. We could sneak up behind the Meisters and listen to their conversation. These bits of information formed the bases of our “Toilet News Broadcast,” or TNB, for short, because it was in the toilet where we could talk over our secrets without fear that the Nazis might spy on us. The TNB supplied us with more hope than facts, but it was necessary to keep up our spirit.

Chapter 3

Victoria's health improved and she was sent back to the barrack. For her happy homecoming, we pooled our meager food ration. We each gave up a slice of bread, a dab of margarine and a bit of jelly. Magda mixed the red jelly with the margarine and spread it on the bread slices, creating a layer cake. Victoria was surprised and shared it with us and Elli, another prisoner. Unfortunately, Victoria picked the wrong day. That day, the Germans fumigated the barracks. We had to stay outside and could not sleep. We dragged ourselves to the factory.

I felt drowsy, my feet ached, my eyes were closing at their own will, my head bobbed and I had to exert extra energy to prevent myself from falling asleep while standing.

Around one o'clock in the morning, in my half-dazed state, I was shaken by a horrible scream originating from Magda's direction. Everybody stopped working and rushed to her machine. But it was Victoria who was in trouble. Being weak, tired, and groggy she was too slow to withdraw her hand when the speeding drill hit the pipe. Her right index finger got caught between the pipe and the drill. The Meister of her compartment ran and shut off the machine, but the drill was embedded in Victoria's finger and wouldn't pull loose. The machine had to be restarted again. As it retreated automatically, it took a chunk of Victoria's finger with it.

Blood gushed from her finger and she fainted. A guard arrived and dragged her into the barrack. When Magda glanced at Victoria's bloody machine, she fainted too. We pulled her inside the toilet room and revived her with some cold water. The Meister

took a large rag, covered the gruesome machine and chased us back to work. I trembled. It was only a miracle that I could pull my shaking hand away from the spinning vise while inserting the pipe. To keep alert, I recited one poem after the other, then prayed until sunrise.

Victoria was understandably in a wretched mood. She suffered and made everyone's life miserable. We took her insults, hoping for the better and kept her spirit up and her body clean. By not having to work while recuperating from her injury, she became acquainted with several friendly women who did have patience for her. Elli Kosar was one of them. Just like Victoria's, Elli's family owned large parcels of land, and the two women had found kinship through their past. Although the law had taken the land away from the Jewish owners, they still reminisced fondly about old times.

One day while visiting Victoria, Elli told us that she had married her husband on account of a bet. She had been attending agriculture school to learn about modern farming. Dezso, on the other hand, the son of a wealthy landowner, believed in the old-fashion methods. Elli bet Dezso that if he harvested a better yield of crop by using manure, than she with artificial fertilizer, she would marry him. Elli's crop turned out much better, but by then she had fallen in love with Dezso. She lied about her yield and married him.

Lilla wanted to know which method they used on the land after they were married. Ellie's eyes turned hazy. She said they had no chance to try because that was the year the land had been confiscated from them.

Elli was a gentle person, resembling Regina in many ways, but Elli had more spunk and a great sense of humor. She told us that Berta, a baptized divorcee, was extremely kind to her because she hoped to marry Elli's brother. Elli refused any extra portion of bread, but Berta persisted. Even though Elli asked for no privileges, Berta appointed her as a block helper at barrack No. 3. Since befriending Victoria, Elli

accepted whatever Berta offered, and gave most of it to Victoria. Parts of that always trickled down to the rest of the family.

On August 14, the day the cast was removed from Victoria's hand, the TBN spread the news that Paris had been liberated. At first we thought it was only one of those “maybe” news, which often was made up from dreams and hopes, until Pannia, the Russian girl, confided to me that it was the truth. The Germans wouldn't allow us to enjoy our happy news. The Zahlappells lasted longer, the Hauptscharfuhrer shouted more frequently, the soldiers and the Aufseherinen pushed and kicked us harder. In addition, the Meisters upped the quotas of the material we were supposed to finish in one day's work.

The optimists were saying the angrier the Nazis were getting, the closer would be our liberation. The pessimists were saying in the meantime we would be tortured to death.

There were many daytime bombings in September, and one of them knocked out the power station that supplied electricity to the factory. Nothing could have pleased us more than staying outdoors this time. We lay on the grass and gazed at the clear, blue sky. I imagined that American airmen would parachute into our camp, and I was already making up a poem about the reception I would give them, when Gretl stormed into the yard. She said, with the exception of a few *numbers* — she didn't say, *people* or *workers* — everybody had to go to the forest to chop wood.

I resented being called a number, but I would rather work in the forest than the factory. Gretl read off only fifteen numbers, and mine was one of them. Yet, I wondered what kind of work we could do without power. From my family I was the only one selected to remain behind. The others went to the forest.

The Aufseherinen made us run all the way. It was quiet inside the factory. The Meisters walked among the machines silently. Their faces showed depression, with a

tint of gloom. They viewed the machines as if they were corpses, and hoped soon they would be resurrected. The machines seemed all right to me. As I walked toward my machine, I saw Meister Carpface and Obermeister Horsehead having an animated conversation. I couldn't exactly hear what they were talking about, but from the Ober's gestures, I gathered he was demonstrating how the airplanes dived down on a particular target and demolished it. As soon as I reached my machine Meister Carpface came over with a handful of rags, and told me I should clean my machine so thoroughly that there shouldn't be as much dirt left on it as a fly speck.

I scrubbed the oily machine while my mind was at the forest. the machine became sparkling clean. I could see its green color. In Hungary, green was the color of hope and I hoped I could get out of there quickly. Since I was finished, and I didn't see my Meister, I decided to sit down and rest. I was wrong. Meister Carpface must have been lurking nearby. He sneaked up behind me and picked me up by my ears. He showered me with a barrage of foul words and accused me of being lazy. He drabbed me to Edit's machine and ordered me to clean it even better than I did my own. When that was spotless, he dragged me to Lilla's machine and pushed me so hard that I fell onto the brake handle. I showered his head with many foul words too. when he let me get more clean rags, I rushed to the toilet to examined the bruises on my body, but it was too dark in the room to see anything. I returned to my machine. The Meister awaited me with his arms akimbo. He cursed me for loafing and grabbed my arm so hard that I cried out. Because of my handkerchief was drying out at the side of our bunk bed, I had to wipe my face with my soiled hands. The Meister laughed at the sight of my messy face, his belly shook. He grabbed me by the back of my dress collar, chocking me and dragged me to the desk of the German woman worker. A tiny mirror was hanging at the side of her desk.

...“How do you like that pig face in the mirror?” Carpfacer asked, grinning. He gave me a clean rag to wipe my face. I thanked him, while wishing he would drop dead.

I returned to work, and made the big mistake of asking the Meister what time it was since the electric clock had stopped. He was beyond himself and said I would have to work also during the lunch period. After the lunch period ended, he said I could eat with one hand and work with the other. I was afraid to go wash my hands and ate the two thin slices of bread while scrubbing the body of Sarah’s machine. Obermeister came over and asked how dare I eat after the lunch break was over. I said it was my Meister who told me.

The Obermeister walked up to Meister Carpfacer and what he said upset Meister Carpfacer even more. He stormed over to me, tore the half-eaten bread slice out of my hand, threw it to the oily floor and attacked me with both fists. He took a step backward to give himself a better aim while swinging at me, and lunged forward toward my head like a boxer. Seeing him charge, I stepped aside. Carpfacer missed, slid on the soggy bread, banged his head on one of the brakes and was unable to rise. He swore and tried to grab hold of the side of the machine, but his hand slipped. He tried again and grunted as if getting up would hurt him. Instinctively I reached out to help him. For a fraction of a second he hesitated as if thinking over my offer. Then he accepted my help. I pulled. Carpfacer jerked his body, rose, moaned, cursed and walked away. I knew I was a better person for helping the one who hurt me, and I smiled through my tears.

Halfway to the center aisle the Meister turned back, picked up a screwdriver and threw it at me. I ducked and the screwdriver sailed over my head and hit the Ober on the arm. The Ober couldn’t figure out what had happened. He removed his hat and scratched the top of his balding head. He walked over to my machine and said the guard would shortly take me back to the barracks. My body was so sore that I limped

all the way. On my way to the washroom, Aufseherin Ilse grabbed me. She said that she hadn't seen me work in the forest, and now I had to help the others dig out the fence posts.

Nobody ever said "no" to Ilse without being kicked, so I followed her. Lilla saw me and offered to take my place, explaining that Ilse only had to look at me and see I had already worked at the factory.

Surprisingly, Ilse agreed. Lilla returned about an hour later, tired and frantic. She had heard Ilse telling Aufseherin Herta that a new transport of Haftlings would arrive soon.

We could barely contain our excitement. We feverishly discussed the possibilities that maybe our own relatives would be among the new transport. At first we hoped so, then we wished them to be at a much better place than we were.

I looked myself over, thinking about the remote chance that my mother would come. I saved slices of bread, and decided to do something with my hair. I no longer could comb my hair with the towel. I had seen narrow, flat aluminum slats in the factory, and when the power was restored, I approached the cutting machine operator and asked her to cut several slits into the metal to make a comb. She tried, succeeded and gave me a comb. Seeing that it worked, the comb manufacturing began at full force.

Rags were disappearing from the factory and Sarah loaned her sewing needles to anyone wanting to make some items for her relatives. We had no thread, but we found cotton rags and pulled out the strands, doubled them and used them as yarn. I made a neat little purse for my mother to keep her things, just in case. Some of the more industrious girls used their files to make jewelry. They took part of the pipes to make rings; also with hammers that flattened the aluminum and worked it into lovely followers, or into the Star of David to be hung on string for necklaces. Many women made crosses.

Of course, we would have to warn our relatives that the jewelry could be worn only when the Germans weren't nearby.

Berta was impressed by our talent and imagination. Beside having one cross made for her sister who she hoped would come soon, she had another one made for herself and hung it on a string as a necklace. She rewarded the artisan with portions of bread, the typical currency in the camp.

The dresses, towels and handkerchiefs were washed. I saved part of my soap. The happy anticipation over seeing our relatives and friends made it worthwhile getting up in the morning.

The new transport arrived while we worked on the day shift. When Lena came into the factory that evening, she reported that none of our relatives was among them.

During the evening Zahlappell we met our new companions. Out of one hundred long-haired women, we found only one Hungarian, and a few Czechoslovakians who could speak Hungarian. The majority of the women were Polish. Most of them had spent five or six years in various camps. We befriended five charming French girls, five Austrians, one of them a middle-aged, Christian doctor. She had been put into a concentration camp because of her political beliefs. Dr. Engle had two nurses with her, neither of them was Jewish. The Italian women with dark complexions and dark eyes, had spent only a few months in various camps. The Yugoslavians had been arrested only recently, and they filled us in with the progress of the war.

We felt somewhat disappointed for not having any relatives among the newcomers. Later, we reluctantly agreed with Victoria that it was for the best that our mothers did not have to work a twelve-hour shift.

In September the Jewish High Holidays approached. Memories of past holidays were welling within us. At our congregation back home, they were called the "Fearful

Holidays.” On the day of Rosh Hoshana the destiny of a person’s life is inscribed in God’s mighty book, and on the day of Yom Kippur the person’s fate is sealed. God makes the decision of who should live and who should die, but repentance, prayer and charity avert the severe decree.

I remembered how sincerely my father believed following these three prescribed *mitzvot*s would influence God to choose a life.

Charity. I recalled the many charitable deeds of my father who would go to any effort to hide his identity when he was helping the less fortunate. It didn’t make any difference if the person was Jewish or not. Once he carried a pair of shoes late at night for a poor child as a Christmas present, and was attacked by a watchdog. He sent cash in the mail for a sick person, or started a business for someone so that he would be able to support himself and his family.

Mother tried to imitate him. Often her act was discovered, yet she continued giving, not only material things, but advice to the less educated or ill-informed peasant women. She fed strangers and visited the sick. By example, my parents taught me how to perform charity as a way of life.

Prayer. Grandfather set the good example by attending services every day and on the holidays he was the first man in and the last one out of the synagogue. My vision of him wearing holiday garments was blotted out and I imagined him as he fought the policemen when they tried to make him disrobe in the synagogue at the morning of the miseries. Prayers, my dear Grandfather, prayers.

Repentance. Oh, God, tell me my sins so I would know what to repent.

My friends reminisced about their past holidays. Sarah talked about the precision-cutting of her mother’s famous noodles. Edit remembered how fussy her mother had been when it came to shine the silver candelabra. We shared our memories of starched and pressed white tablecloths, and the painstaking preparation of food, and

the way our entire outfits were examined. Lilla had no such memories. She just listened, learned, and wished us a Happy New Year.

The spirit of the holidays evaporated quickly. The day after Yom Kippur our bread ration was cut. Until then a loaf of bread was divided into four portions. Now it would be divided into five. Four left us hungry and we feared five would make us starve. Already, I committed the first sin of the New Year. I swore at block helper Kato when she didn't ladle any potatoes into my bowl. Against regulations, she had looked up, seen her cousin standing behind me and dug deeper to dish out several potatoes for her.

During the early part of October we noticed without any doubt, that there was something personal going on between Gretl and the Hauptschar. While they were in the camp, Gretl never left his side. She bawled out any Aufseherine daring to talk to him for more than it was necessary. The girls taken to the Nazi barracks for clean-up work said that Gretl had many lover's quarrels with the Hauptschar. Up till now their affair hadn't affected us too much, but suddenly Gretl turned into a crazy jealous tigress, clawing everybody in her reach. Her husband had been away on the Russian front for over a year without coming home to visit her, and she discovered she was pregnant. The Hauptschar was also married, he ordered Dr. Peltzer to perform an abortion on Gretl. The doctor explained frantically that she didn't have the proper tools to perform a safe abortion. He would not accept her excuse. He put his pistol to the doctor's head and warned if she made any mistake, it would be her last one. Doctor Peltzer had no choice. To make sure things went smoothly, the Hauptschar insisted on being present during the operation. Gretl pleaded with him to leave the room, but he yelled that she shouldn't have allowed him into her room in the first place. Fortunately

for Dr. Peltzer, the abortion was successful. Gretl was back on her feet and she became even more jealous and spiteful. She took her anger out on us who couldn't fight back.

During day time, women were asked to work at the military barracks. Those women returned with rare delicacies such as an onion, a carrot or an apple. When I wanted to go, Magda strictly forbade me. After Gretl's abortion I discovered why. During the first days at the camp one of the youngest girls from barrack No. 3 went down to work. She was violated by a soldier. Now that the news about Gretl's abortion leaked out, this youngster approached the Dr. Peltzer and she performed an abortion on her too.

Chapter 4

Later in the month, during one of the night shifts, Elli woke us up and said a load of shoes had arrived, and since most of us needed them, we should hurry to get a pair. We thanked her and jumped out of bed. Not wanting to be left out, none of us got dressed, only covered ourselves with our blankets and rushed to the storage barrack. The news spread quickly. In a matter of seconds a long line formed in the yard. The Hauptschar appeared and ran his eyes over everyone's shoes. When he reached Edit, he asked why she was there. She pointed at her two big toes sticking out of her shoes. Looking up at Edit, he saw she wore only her nightgown. He became furious, grabbed Edit and shook her, yelling:

"You lousy whore, where do you think this is, a brothel? How dare you appear in front of me like this?"

Edit turned around and was ready to flee for her life. He kicked her in the back and pushed her off the sidewalk into the mud.

"Get back to your room and don't you ever let me catch you dressed improperly."

Those of us who were wearing our blankets, rushed back to the barrack to avoid punishment. We dressed quickly and returned. Edit stayed in the room and cried that she would rather walk barefoot for the winter, than to return and face the Hauptschar.

It was heartbreaking for me to part with my worn pair of shoes. They had come from our store, and had been touched by my father. Now they were scuffed, out of shape and saturated with oil. I tried to pull the tongues out and keep them as souvenirs. However, they were sewn in so securely, they didn't budge. I patted them

gently, gave them a long, loving look and placed them on the top of the pile with the rest of the old shoes.

The canvas shoes with wooden soles which I received, were several sizes larger than my feet even though they were the smallest ones available. I put them on and clopped back to the barrack, scaring the birds off the fence.

After the Hauptschar left the camp, Elli sneaked into the storage room and brought a pair of shoes for Edit.

Edit was grateful, but she complained of chest pains. Without any choice, she had to go into the factory. After an hour of work she slumped down beside her machine and passed out. We carried her back to the barrack where Nurse Valeri said there was nothing she could do with Edit and sent her back to work.

In the morning we led Edit into the hospital. Dr. Peltzer examined her and said the problem was with her heart, but she couldn't help her.

On the following night, during the nine o'clock break, Edit went into the toilet and returned with the most stunning news. Her menstrual period had started. The married women in our compartment gathered and congratulated Edit. She said this was a good reason to celebrate, and this day should be called "Good News Day," hoping that the rest of us also could become normal females again.

Back in the barrack Edit climbed into Rita's bed. Rita and her daughter, Kati, occupied the bunk bed next to Magda. They had befriended our family shortly after our arrival. Edit and Rita carried on a conversation about their sex lives. Rita mentioned how much she missed the lovemaking. Then they described in vivid details how they would act when reuniting with their husbands.

Edit swooned she would wear a black, lacy nightgown. Rita went a step better. She wouldn't wear anything at all. From then on the chit-chat about sex intensified. We, the so-called "virgins," were excluded from this kind of talk. Sarah, an "old maid,"

listened, blushing when hearing what had happened on certain nights. Victoria, one of the virgins, expressed her views that she saw no reason why women were so interested in revealing publicly their private matters.

The next news, that there were several pregnant women in the camp, had a larger impact on everybody. We were concerned about the birth and the future of the babies. Some of the women, already in their fifth month, no longer hid their conditions although it would have been easy. We all had such bloated bellies that any of us could have been taken for a pregnant woman.

The same week, Sarah and I, together with four other women, were picked to act as horses and pull a wagon into the town to bring back supplies for the soldiers. We had a tough night shift behind us, and without much sleep we dragged our aching feet grudgingly until we reached the outskirts of the town. Then, we no longer paid any attention to ourselves and enjoyed the sights.

The old-fashioned buildings were quaint and beautiful. The roofs had shingles that reached over the sides of the buildings, and continued down to the ground, making them look like giant fishes lining up side-by-side. We saw well-trimmed hedges, shapely trees and gorgeous gardens. The autumn flowers edging the vegetable beds, were still in bloom and their fragrance drifted over the immaculate, clean streets.

“I’ve heard that the Germans recycle their garbage,” Sarah said.

That could have been the truth. The streets were free of any refuse.

Our enthusiasm was snuffed out by our guard, Private Hugo’s warning, not to set foot on the sidewalks, as they were for *people*.

“Then, get off the sidewalk, you ass,” one of the women snapped in Hungarian. Luckily for her, Hugo wasn’t a Hungarian-speaking spy. Even from the road we could see anti-American posters pasted on the buildings, and also on the advertisement

posts.

One poster portrayed a large, red octopus with its tentacles squeezing Germany. Another poster showed a huge, fat man sitting on a ballooned moneybag with a big dollar sign on it, and he was eating German soldiers. The caption said, "Don't let this happen to you."

We saw young children playing on the sidewalks and they were not different than those back home. I thought about my cousin Juli who should already be starting kindergarten. I wondered if there were any kindergartens in Auschwitz.

Many women wore black veils over their faces, and dressed in black outfits, presumably in mourning for someone. Wounded soldiers dragged their mutilated bodies in front of picturesque cafes. Small bakery shops nestled between the houses. Their fragrance escaped to the street, and suggested that the spicy gingerbread men would come out any minute to greet us. At a deserted beer hall, we could almost hear, "Ach Do lieber Augustin, Augustin ..." and the clinging of mugs with foaming beer and flapping tops, "Prosit."

After walking about fifteen minutes we were led into a large yard about the size of a soccer field. Men were unloading supplies from an old truck near a tall fence, and carried them into a warehouse. People walked in and out of a small brick office building, which had an apartment over it.

Two roads leading into the yard had gates at each end. As soon as we entered and Private Hugo slammed the gate behind us, the air raid sirens sounded.

Everyone in the yard disappeared as if a distant bunker had sucked them in. Even Hugo abandoned us.

"What now?" asked one of the women by the side of the wagon. By then Sarah had developed an inquisitive mind and suggested one of us stay with the wagon and the other should go hunting.

I strolled with Sarah behind the office. We discovered a vegetable bin, the kind that farmers used to keep root vegetables for the winter. We dug like dogs looking for buried bones, and soon we saw a layer of straw beneath the soil. Under the straw we came upon a layer of carrots and several other kinds of vegetable.

The sleeves and the bottoms of the legs of our overalls contained elastic bands, and we stuffed the carrots into our sleeves and pants until the bulges became obvious. Then we went back to the wagon, where we relayed the information of our findings to the others. When everyone else was loaded up with vegetables we put back the straw, patted down the soil and retreated happily.

“Let them think the gophers did it,” Sarah said, and we laughed.

The air raid lasted so long that Hugo said we had to rush back for the evening Zählappell without any supplies. He made us run all the way back to the camp, and we were glad that the wagon we pulled was empty.

Sarah was concerned what would happen if we would be searched before entering the camp. We were about to discard our loot over the railroad tracks, when the air raid siren sounded again, and we were chased inside the barrack. While the falling bombs rattled the foundation, we divided the carrots and munched like contented rabbits.

Terribly tired from not having had any sleep, I worked slower than usual in the factory. When the Meister came to my machine I expected that he would yell at me. Instead, he said I should stop my machine for awhile because the cutting machines, which supplied me with the pipes, had broken down and needed repairs. I sat happily for about five minutes, when Carpfacc brought over a crate of finished pipes whose insides were rough, and handed me some sandpaper. He told me to start the machine, insert a pipe into the spinning vise and with the help of the sandpaper, I should put my right thumb inside the pipe and smooth out the roughage.

The task was easy, only it was slow and monotonous. Apparently, I dozed off because suddenly, I felt a sharp pain in my thumb. The pipe could have been spinning for a long time, making the edge blade-sharp. It was this spinning hot pipe that sliced into my flesh and cut into the bone. I screamed frantically. The Meister reached my side first. He shut off the engine and pulled me loose from the pipe. I couldn't see just how badly I was cut, as the silver powder of the metal covered my whole hand. My friends were moaning worse than I, and the Meister ordered them to their machines. He pulled out a large handkerchief from his pocket, and I was surprised how gently he bandaged my thumb. I was scared but felt no pain.

"Go to the first aid station," he said. There was only one aid station. I sat down and while waiting for the German nurse, the blood soaked through the handkerchief. Women from my barrack who worked nearby, came over to see me. In a matter of seconds, the news was spread that I had cut off my entire thumb. Then a nurse arrived and chased them away. She jotted down my number and said she wasn't permitted to give any first aid to a Haftling. Instead, she would call the guard. When the Meister saw me heading for the door, he pulled me back by my ear. Calling me a lazy sow, he handed me a steel file and told me to go back to work. I gripped the file loosely, and it slipped out of my hand, flew away and landed on the floor.

I bent down to pick it up, and cried. My thumb was throbbing with pain and my blood saturated the handkerchief. I returned to my machine and as I worked, I bloodied up everything I touched.

The Meister had nothing better to do than keep an eye on me. He asked if I would like to go back to the barrack and sleep.

For some reason I shook my head and told him I would work until morning. He smiled and walked away.

Magda went over to the Obermeister and begged him to let me get first aid. The

Obermeister called the guard and told me I could leave.

As soon as we were out of the factory, the guard looked around as if he wanted to make sure no one was nearby. He asked in a soft, caring voice, "What happened to you, child?" From his accent and because he cared, I immediately knew he wasn't German. I told him about my accident. After he said he was sorry, I mustered enough courage and asked for his nationality. He said he came from Poland. Now I understood why I hadn't seen him right from the start. He had been brought in after the Polish women arrived. Obviously, his mission was the same as the Hungarian soldier's. What the Hauptschar didn't count on was that the Polish Jewish women spoke only Yiddish with each other, and Yiddish was similar to German. I smiled beneath my tears.

The hospital was totally dark. I knocked on the first door and Nurse Lonka greeted me angrily.

"Come back in the morning," she yawned. "The doctors are asleep."

"What are the doctors for anyhow? They don't have to work the night shift like the rest of us. One of them should stay up during the night and be of help to those of us who have to slave in the factory."

I was yelling so loudly that Nurse Valeri came out and hushed me up.

"You heard it, come back in the morning, you loud mouth."

"I might die before the morning!"

Back at our room the women of the day shift were sleeping. I wished I could awaken Lena and cry on her shoulder, but decided not to frighten her. I suffered silently until the morning. When Lena saw me, she was upset for not waking her up.

Naturally, at Zahlappell the count was off. The nurse forgot to report that I had come home during the night. Aufseherin Herta was confused and angry. She hit me on the head. And as if that wasn't enough, the barrack helpers bawled me out. My thumb was throbbing from pain, and by then, I was so furious that even the peace-loving Lena

couldn't restrain me from fighting with the helpers.

"Just who do you think you are, shouting at me like this? I came back bleeding, and no one helped me while you fat cats slept peacefully all night. Now you are yelling at me like the Gestapo. One more word out of you and I will shove this bloody mess into your mouth." I launched my hand forward and stopped close to Bozsi's face.

She looked at the blood-soaked handkerchief and backed away. "Shut up, but I'm warning you though, don't you dare stand in line for coffee until your shift arrives."

By the time I was allowed to see the doctor I was really in agony.

Dr. Engel, the Austrian doctor, examined my thumb and shook her head, asking me why I hadn't come any sooner. I told her what had happened during the night. She was sorry and promised that henceforth there would be one of the doctors ready to help us at all hours. She cleaned my wound and put sulfur powder on it. I was grinding my teeth, and cried. Hilda explained that back home she would have given me a tetanus shot, but here the Weltner wouldn't make any available. I mentioned that I had received a shot earlier in the spring. She said I was lucky. I remembered my mother's remark at the start of this awful journey last spring, that it was God's will that I should be injured. It could have been. If I hadn't received a tetanus shot then, my life now would be in jeopardy.

I told my thoughts to the doctor. She said who knows what reason why God allowed the Nazis to drag us to this place. I asked her if I could stay at the barrack for the night. Explaining it was up to the Weltner, she dressed my thumb with a paper bandage and told me to wait.

Instead of sitting down, I left to visit the sick in the hospital rooms. In the first room I saw Mrs. Merey, a well-known concert pianist from the city of Gyor. She had been in the hospital since the day of our arrival. She had known Regina, and expressed her deepest sympathy. I asked Mrs. Merey about the nature of her illness, and she told me

she had tuberculosis. I tried to leave her with a few encouraging words, like the kind a clergyman would say to a desperately ill person. I was going to say, "May God watch over you." Then I thought of dear Regina. God certainly hadn't watched over her. I wished her well and visited another woman, whose right leg was crushed by a falling case of pipes. Her wound had become infected. Next to her lay a Yugoslav woman. A Meister had made her lift a heavy crate and now she was having a miscarriage. In the adjacent room I saw a baby-faced girl with thick, black hair. She was staring at the ceiling and didn't respond to my greeting. I asked Nurse Lonka what was wrong with her.

"She is a silent one. Once in awhile when she sees potatoes she becomes violent, and shouts in Yiddish, 'No more potatoes.'"

"She hates potatoes that much?" I asked.

"Yes. I was told while they were being transported from Poland to Germany her twin sister was violated by five SS soldiers. When they had enough they stuffed the girl's vagina full of potatoes right in front of her family. I understand her mother had a stroke and died."

"Oh, my God, that poor girl," I sighed, and went over to touch her hand. She responded with a weak smile. I felt a sharp pain in my chest and my stomach churned.

Many other girls had skin diseases and various kinds of stomach ailments. After I finished my visiting, I realized how lucky I was.

I returned to the examination room where I found a young, pretty-faced girl, with curly blond hair, also waiting for the Weltner. She sat, shaking. I asked what was the matter with her. She glanced around and said she had a skin disease of the scalp that was itching terribly. I hinted that it might not even be a disease. I didn't say it might be lice, but she caught on. Her face turned pale. "Do you think we could?" she whispered, and scratched her head.

“Why not? Without hot water and an efficient amount of soap, it’s a wonder it didn’t happen any sooner,” I said, and scratched my head immediately.

The Weltner, a husky blond with broad shoulders and a raspy voice, arrived. She looked me over and asked if I had missed any day of work. I told her, not so far. She allowed me to stay in the barrack for one night, which was more than I expected. My friends wished me a restful night and left for their shift into the factory.

After some hesitation I asked Lena, who had just returned from the factory, if she could recognize a louse. She laughed. “Why should you have to worry about lice? Magda told me you are the only one in our family who washes up every single day.”

Nevertheless, I asked her to inspect my clothing. She said that she couldn’t find anything suspicious.

“Look at my head.”

“Bend down a little.”

She looked between the roots of my hair, parting the strands slowly and blowing at several places. “Oh, oh,” she said, and her face was red.

“You mean...?”

“Only eggs.”

“Can you see if the parents are there?”

She scraped my scalp with her fingernails and looked once more, and told me she could not see the parents, only eggs. I was embarrassed, ashamed and speechless. I wept. Lena tried to soothe me, without success. I thought of my mother, how she kept me clean when I was a child although other children in school had been infected with lice. Now, when I was on my own, I became filthy with lice. I made Lena promise not to tell anyone.

The night shift returned. Edit informed me that the Meister was angry when he didn’t find me at the machine. He even ran to the time clock to check if I was punched

in.

By noon I found out that others also had lice.

The Weltner, the doctors and nurses went from room to room and sprayed everybody's head with lice killer, and made us bandage our heads with our towels. Sarah was the only one who didn't have any louse and claimed that she was ignored even by bedbugs and mosquitoes. We envied her. Next day our hair was cut back shorter. The following day all the Aufseherinen had their heads bandaged too. We laughed at the sight, knowing they had hot water, shampoo and a change of clothing.

Even though my thumb wasn't healed, old Carpfacer kept me busy. He brought a stick and made me crawl under every machine in the entire compartment, to get the pipes that had fallen beneath them. The black, dirty oil penetrated my overalls and my dress also became saturated. While poking between the gears, Carpfacer warned me not to sabotage the brakes. I told him I had no idea how to do it. He grabbed the two levers, pulled them the opposite direction and turned their handles down. "This is the way."

I was flabbergasted and tried to figure out his reason. I told my friends. Lilla said she had noticed when the air raid sirens were sounding, the Meister grinned. Edit said he never talked to the Polish girl, Jadviga, only to the Russian girls. Magda suggested perhaps he was a Communist. According to Victoria, we were all wrong. The Meister showed me how to sabotage the machine in order to punish me if I did. I dared not to find out. He watched every move I made. It was obvious he hated me more than the others.

Chapter 5

M. thumb hurt terribly, and Meister Carpfacer wouldn't leave me alone. Like many of his *landsmen* who made a science out of hating us, he, too, developed his own style and method. He kept poking me with a stick to make me crawl deeper under the machines. He infuriated me to the point that I contemplated sabotage. Later, I went into the toilet and it took me twice as long to come out because I had to manage with one hand. Upon my return the Meister accused me of staying away too long and to make up for it, he said he would keep me for another hour. I couldn't pinpoint the specific reason why he was so much against me, and neither could my friends. Magda said she would inform the barrack helpers about my delay.

The new shift came in and my Meister handed me over to Meister Popeye, who was named so for obvious reasons. He resembled the cartoon character and even kept a pipe in his mouth, although, according to the girls at his department, he never smoked.

Popeye instructed me to polish every machine in his compartment. The way I saw it, it would have taken me at least twelve hours, but I was afraid to open my mouth. I began with the machine of a dark-haired, little French girl. In way of encouragement, she said these bad times soon would be over and the Germans were going to be *kaput*. She spoke with a charming accent, only I was too upset to appreciate it. I told her I felt I would be *kaput* long before they.

"Mon cheri, you are too young to talk like this," she said, softly. Popeye saw us together and told me to move to another location where only the Germans worked.

There I wouldn't have any chance to cackle. He gave me a bunch of rags and a shove. I took the wrong turn and wound up in an unfamiliar aisle. The place was dark, only one light shone in from the far end of a different department. Sometimes a department had a power failure while the rest of the factory didn't, and the Germans would work feverishly to restore the power. But this department seemed to be abandoned. I noticed the first machine was exactly like mine and decided this was my chance to see if I knew how to sabotage it. I stepped inside the place, making sure that I was alone, then grabbed the lever of a machine nearest to the door. Doing exactly what Carpface had warned me not to do, a screeching sound made me believe that I had broken the machine. Encouraged by my success, I was about to ruin the next machine, when I saw the silhouette of a man. He wore the familiar hat of the Meisters. I knew I was doomed and expected to be apprehended, but he didn't notice me. He pushed himself against some man, who struggled to get away from him. I could hear the man's muffled pleading and recognized him as an Italian.

The Meister put one hand over the Italian's mouth, yet I could still hear his pitiful groan, as he was pinned against the machine, face down, while the Meister was right behind him making funny pumping motions.

My breathing stopped. My whole inside was shaking. I had no idea what the Meister was doing to the young Italian. I also feared what would happen if suddenly the power was restored, and they discovered the sabotaged machine. Then it occurred to me, that neither of them would be talking about being in that department. The Meister left first, and the Italian wobbled after him.

I returned to my place, continuing to polish the machines until the hour was up. The guard took me back to the barrack. Again, the whole camp was at an uproar, because they were still counting. Everybody screamed as I came in and blamed me for having to stand at Zahlappell for an extra hour after already being dead-tired. If it were

not for Elli, I would have been beaten by my own people. Magda confessed, she was too exhausted and unintentionally had forgotten to report that I was kept an extra hour. I cried as I walked into the washroom and waited for Victoria to come out to help me. When she had injured her finger, I always helped her to wash up, but neither she, nor any other member of my group, appeared.

My tears were falling as I tried to remove the paper bandage. A young-faced woman with gray hair walked over to me. Without asking if I needed help, she just took over. She said her name was Irma. Thinking of my dear aunt, I liked her right away. She removed the bandage and looked at my silver dust-covered wound. Irma remarked that this scab should be my biggest problem. It would be healed before I got married. She smoothed my hair and kissed me on the forehead. I cried freely as I thanked her for her help.

It was hard for me to climb up to my bunk; I slipped and made too much noise. My roommates shouted at me to settle down. Leaning against the post, I wept quietly. The noise didn't awaken Sarah, but my crying did. She climbed up and let me sleep below.

In the morning I told Edit about my experience of the previous night with the Italian and a Meister. Her face turned gray, and her mouth twitched as if to hide a smile.

"Forget what you saw," she said. I was glad to do so.

A few days later, each of us received a pair of coarse, dark gray stockings that irritated our skin. Since winter was approaching, it was still better than not having any. We were also given a primitive stocking halter.

In our free time we huddled on the top of our bunk beds, covered ourselves with blankets and shivered in the unheated barrack. Irma, who knew Rita from back home, came in often to cheer us up with her amusing stories.

I loved the one she told about her Italian honeymoon. Her parents had given her a

luxurious wedding. She said it was so expensive that even the horses drank champagne. She and her new husband, Dani, danced all night and took the early morning train to Naples, Italy. Hoping to be alone throughout the night, they made themselves comfortable. When they were embracing each other, Dani's best friend, Zsiga, entered and said he was taking a vacation in Naples. Not wanting to insult him the three of them spent the trip together in the same compartment.

Irma was perturbed when she found out that Zsiga had reservations at the same hotel they would be staying. She was looking forward to a romantic dinner with Dani, but the friend joined them. After dinner Zsiga introduced another person and the four of them played bridge. Irma was exhausted and too bashful to break up the game. They played until three o'clock in the morning. Zsiga escorted them to their suite and said he would see them soon. In her state of mind she failed to notice the sly smile on his face. She undressed and finished showering, when there was a knock on the door. The friend, dressed in sport clothes, said he was ready to take the young couple for a sunrise buggy ride. Her shyness prevented her from protesting and they accepted the ride. She couldn't remember seeing any of the scenery, as she was overly tired. They ate breakfast at a roadside country inn and drove back to the hotel. She fell asleep on the sofa. When she awoke her husband said it was time to go swimming and to see the water show.

Irma was on her honeymoon for six days without being left alone with her bridegroom long enough to consume their marriage. The three of them did have a good time as Zsiga came up with the most unusual entertainment. On the seventh day she packed her suitcase and wrote a note informing her husband she was going back to her mother. She wished him a good time with his friend for the rest of their honeymoon. She was about to leave when Dani came in. He was surprised to see her in a traveling suit. Holding back her tears, Irma pointed at the note. After reading the

note, he picked her up and suit and all, he placed her on their bed, put out a "Do Not Distrub" sign, and locked the door. He undressed her and she cried while they made love for the first time. They slept through a whole day and when they finally emerged, the desk clerk handed them a note from Zsiga, wishing them happiness. He was sorry that he was called back to his job in Hungary.

The young couple spent the rest of their honeymoon, enjoying the sights and each other.

On their first wedding anniversary her husband confessed the truth about Zsiga. Their co-workers had made a bet with Dani that Irma wouldn't stay with him longer than six days, and they sent his best friend to check up on them. Since Irma started to pack only on the seventh day his fellow workers had to pay for the entire honeymoon. We enjoyed the story, until Irma burst out in tears. Dani and Zsiga had been reported missing in Russia. Edit cried for her lost husband, Sarah cried for her younger brother, Rita for her son, I for my uncle, and the story-telling turned into a crying party.

In the middle of October we heard from the TNB that one of the German women workers was having an affair with an Italian. We talked over the event. Nobody blamed the German woman as the Italians were young, handsome and energetic while the German men at the factory were neither. Also by then, Jadviga made no secret about her affair with Mario. Despite the warning of punishment, it was conceivable that sooner or later one of us would fall in love with an Italian.

Rita conversed regularly with Luigi, an Italian, who sang operas during the night break. He was kind to supply her with apples for her teenage daughter, Kati. Rita insisted she was not emotionally attached to him.

The last week of October the news circulated that we were going to have a

canteen, where such items as combs, needles, toothbrushes, onions or carrots could be purchased. At first we believed that we would be paid for our labor, but were told if anyone exceeded her quota, only then would she receive a ticket to pay for goods. This was a tricky incentive to urge us to work harder.

Berta went from room to room, begging everyone not to try to work harder. She explained that each piece we produced would make the war last longer. Besides, if the Germans realized that we could do more, they would raise our quotas anyhow. Arguments raged all over the camp. Some women felt it was up to themselves to make the decision. If they wanted to work harder for extra benefits, no one had the right to interfere.

I believed those women were traitors. Sarah said they were plain selfish, and according to Victoria they were stupid. Magda called a family meeting and made us promise not to work for extras. I assured her I could barely keep up with what I was supposed to do now. The rest of the girls agreed too, yet there were many women, especially from the new transport, who did work for extras. "Me first," was their attitude, although it was a short-range outlook.

November was cold and rainy. We had air raids, and bombs fell near the Italian barracks, killing several Italians. The electric power station was hit too. While we didn't have to work inside the factory, the Hauptschar still made our lives miserable. He ordered us to clean the rubble after the bombs hit the town. We had no idea what awaited us, such as unexploded bombs or dead bodies, or perhaps while working, the building would collapse over our heads. From our family Sarah, Magda and I were selected for the job. The rest of our family wished us God's help, while weighing the possibilities that we might not see each other again.

As we lined up for the march, Berta told us we should view the dead Germans with

a thought that they weren't going to kill any more Jews.

The Hauptschar warned us not to bring back anything from the bombed-out houses or we would be severely punished. The guard led us out of camp and into the town. Lippstadt surely had changed since the last time we had seen it. Houses bombed to the ground were still smoldering from the recent attack, and there were only a few people on the streets.

The Hauptschar wasn't sure at which house we were supposed to dig until a civilian messenger told him to go directly to the center of the town. The road was rough and torn up most of the way. Our destination was a three-story house. Corporal Otto, who always smelled of onion, brought over a tall ladder and put it against the building. He ordered several of us to climb in through the window, and remove and bring down every usable item we could carry. Magda was told to climb first, then Sarah and I were to follow. We ascended into a nicely furnished apartment. There were only a few things broken and a thin layer of dust covered the furniture. Magda found a soldier's uniform draped over the back of a chair.

"Let's pretend that he is still in it," she said, smiling. Magda took hold of one sleeve, Sarah the other and I grabbed the collar. With much delight we pulled the uniform apart. Sarah kidded that we were told to bring down the usable items. As a result, we ransacked the apartment, and made sure nothing was usable. A large, faded rubber ball was the only thing we couldn't destroy. Magda tossed it out the window. At the bottom of the ladder Corporal Otto caught the ball and asked what the hell we wanted him to do with it.

"You told us to bring down everything unbroken," Magda replied. Otto urged us to climb down. We heard that those who climbed into the second and first floor did the same thing as we did. The guard wrinkled his brow, ordered us to another house, and to bring down the good shingles from the roof, but no one wanted to climb.

"You little runt, go up there," Otto shouted, "and be cautious not to break any whole shingle."

I climbed up to the roof and let the good shingles slip through my fingers and fall onto the ground. Otto cursed while dodging the shingles, and warned me to do a better job.

"Climb up and show me how," I said. He swore and ordered me to the ground and sent up someone else.

Otto made me go over to a group of women who were digging out a cellar. I saw Irma and joined her. She found a doll wedged between the rubble and wanted to pull it out to look at it. The doll was stuck. Irma pulled harder. A small hand emerged, still holding onto the doll's leg. Irma saw a tiny girl. She screamed and fainted onto a pile of plaster. I tried to help her and shouted to the guard to get some water. He ignored me.

When Irma regained consciousness she burst out crying, and we cried with her. None of us viewed the dead body as a German, who wouldn't hate Jews anymore. To us she was only an innocent child, despite the stories the Polish girls who had suffered through many atrocities had told about the various methods the Germans used to kill Jewish children.

A couple of civilians removed the body and from then on we just sat and talked. The guards didn't urge us to work until another civilian came and said that we were digging at the wrong location. We were told to move on. We plodded through the rubble until we reached the other end of the town. No sooner did we arrive at our new destination when the air raid sirens blew. We were herded into a large garage, and warned if anyone darted out during the air raid, she would be shot on sight. After the threat, the soldiers ran away. Even if we would venture to escape, there was no one to see us.

A slightly damaged apartment was over the garage. Immediately, Sarah was ready to go on an expedition. She climbed the rickety staircase. Magda and I followed her, while the rest of the women sat quietly on the floor.

We walked through the apartment and ended up in a kitchen and pantry, where the shelves were loaded with food. This place must have belonged to a privileged person as we knew food was scarce in the land. We found salami, cheese, jars of marmalade, pickles and other good things to eat.

“The Hauptschar warned us not to carry anything back to the barracks, but he didn’t say we couldn’t eat what we found,” I said, jokingly.

Magda set the table with real silverware and linen napkins, and we gorged ourselves while the bombers were flying overhead.

“I wish the rest of the family could also be here with us,” Sarah sighed. Magda decided to take back some salami to Lena, even if it cost her hair. She cut off a chunk and put it into the top of her overalls

“You look lopsided, cut another piece to make it even,” Sarah suggested. Magda took her advice. After our bellies were full, we went downstairs and told Irma to go up and have her fill.

Several women followed Irma. They stuffed other items into their overalls, saying if the raid lasted much longer, it would be too dark for a body search, but they were wrong. The Aufseherinen were waiting for us and started to conduct a body search. Those in the first lines tossed away everything they had brought with them. By the time they reached us, the sirens were howling again. The Aufseherinen rushed for shelter. Sarah and Magda picked up a pair of scissors, thread, knife, new toothbrushes, toothpaste, a big chunk of cheese and a bunch of onions. I carried away a bag of carrots. We divided everything equally and told the story about our adventures at the digging. It was completely dark when Zahlappell was called. We were informed there

wasn't going to be any bread that night because the bakery, which supplied the camp, was bombed. Those of us with filled stomachs lay down to a restful night.

When work resumed the weather turned damp and cold, and Lilla became sick. She was in such pain that she couldn't even turn in her bed or move on her own. The doctor suspected some kind of rheumatism and there was nothing she could do for her. In the hospital room she lay on a musty straw sack. We sat at her bedside, trying to warm her hands and feet.

We met Anni, a slim young girl who worked as a nurse's aide. She stayed with Lilla, brought her an old pot which she dubbed a bedpan, and washed and fed her. Anni sang American songs, did a terrific Judy Garland imitation, and entertained Lilla and the patients in the other rooms. She was born to baptized parents, and had no relatives at the camp. Lilla became fond of Anni and when the Weltner no longer allowed her to stay in the hospital, she asked the family to accept her as a member. Anni was voted in by unanimous decision. She took over the late Regina's bed. Beside being unselfish, Anni was cheerful, never complained, and when there was work to be done she would take over if any of us didn't feel up to it.

The weather became even colder. The wind blew harshly as we stood at Zahlappell. We shivered not only outdoors but also in our room. I thought often of my mother. At home she used to bundle up in a fur coat, warm hat, scarf, gloves and she also used a fur muff. How could she manage the winter in Auschwitz? We talked about Birkenau and the chances of surviving there without heat, without food and without proper clothing. Here at least we didn't freeze while we were in the factory.

The barrack rooms were worse during the night. Those who slept in the top bunks would climb down to keep warmer under double blankets with a partner. I slept with

Sarah. Her body was warm and she was a quiet sleeper. Edit complained that Lilla was listless. Victoria was disturbed by the way Magda made noises through her nose. Lena worked on the second shift and slept alone. She covered herself with the rest of the family's blankets.

Anni had no one to share her bed and asked the family to accept her friend, Terri, who was also alone. Terri had been born Jewish, but raised in the Christian faith. A day before our deportation Terri's birth origin was discovered by an anti-Semitic clerk at the registrar's office. Terri's stepmother loved her very much. She accompanied her to Auschwitz, where they were separated. Terri spoke softly, never argued, and wore a cross on a string around her neck. She knelt by her bedside and prayed every night. Each time she heard Victoria utter some blasphemy, she cringed as if she had been hit. Anni assured her it was only a put-on, that on the inside Victoria was pure. Anni was a good soul and she believed everyone was just like her.

One morning, when we tried to sleep off a tiresome night shift, Gretl charged in, looking for some help for the military barracks. She saw Anni and Terri huddling under the blanket and accused them of sleeping together for sexual reasons. We jumped and returned to our own bunks. After Gretl left, Rita remarked how did she dare accuse us of such conduct when she saw two young Aufseherinen behind their barrack hugging each other and fondling each other's breasts.

"If you think that's something," said a woman from the other side of the room, "I saw with my own eyes how a Meister was making an Italian lay over the ammunition crates."

At Birkenau I saw a sexual act between a male and female. At the factory I had witnessed the act between two males, yet I was unable to visualize how females could do it with each other. It was obvious that Lilla didn't know either. She asked Edit. After Edit explained, I jumped off my bunk, dashed to the toilet and threw up.

The snow arrived early that season. The local factory workers said that none of them remembered having seen snow in November. The weather was also anti-Semitic. The Zahlappells were held outdoors despite the cold weather. The Hauptschar threatened to shave our heads if we covered ourselves with our blankets. There were so many sick people unable to work, that the owner of the factory sent a letter to the Hauptschar warning him to heat the barracks, otherwise he would report him for sabotaging the war effort.

His note brought a quick result. Soon we felt as warm in the barracks as in the factory, although neither was up to a comfortable temperature. Then the coal-shoveling began. We had to spend hours of our sleeping time to break up large lumps of coal. My fingers were numb from the cold. Sarah brought back from the factory a large piece of black felt and small piece of red flannel. I made mittens for both of us and lined them with the flannel. My feet were still cold. I remembered back home the peasants wound rags around their feet during the winter and I did the same. There was plenty of room in my shoes for rags.

The Germans were already wearing their winter outfits and, finally, we received our coats. It was snowing when we lined up at the supply barrack. The coats were piled up on a long table. Each person's number was jotted down after receiving her coat. I was given a huge, beautiful, pink silk, bat-sleeved, opera coat, and since I wasn't going to the opera I surely would freeze to death. I approached Berta and pleaded with her to get me another coat. She said they had only as many coats as women. I recalled the harsh curse I was hit with at B.III when I exchanged my clothing, yet when I felt the thin silk, I made up my mind to take a chance. I knew it was selfish of me to want a warmer coat, yet I reasoned if someone needed this large size, she probably had more natural insulation to keep herself warm. I threw back the coat on the pile and returned to the line. Aufseherin Helga recognized me. She said I already

received a coat. While she looked down to check my number, I grabbed a coat off the table and told her I was only holding the line for my friend who had to go to the bathroom.

She gave me a shove and told me to leave.

This time I secured a fully-lined, gray herringbone, wool coat. It was short, but still better than the silk coat. My joy of having succeeded evaporated when I saw old Mrs. Katz wearing the opera coat.

“Forget it,” Sarah said. “Your little coat would fit only on one of her arms.”

We were given needles and thread and told to remove one sleeve from our coat and exchange it with someone else’s. Sarah gave me her pink wool sleeve, which was too long. I cut it off and made a bonnet out of it, even though I could only wear it when the Hauptschar wasn’t nearby. They painted a long, red stripe on the back of our coats just like those on our overalls and dress.

During December there was talk about Christmas, hoping that even the callous-hearted Germans would have some peace and good will in them for this holiday. When Berta was informed that no shift would go to work on Christmas Eve, she planned to have some entertainment. Several women volunteered to clean the stage and dust the old piano in one of the empty, dilapidated barracks.

Berta put Anni in charge of organizing the program and she began teaching Edit a tap dance routine. They made themselves costumes out of rags and rehearsed every day. Terri would be doing a Hungarian Csardas. The French girls were planning on singing *shansons*. Several piano recitals were on the program. I was in the choir. Women raised in the Christian faith were going to sing Christmas carols in four languages.

The anticipation ran high. Finally, we were going to have a few hours of fun and relaxation for the first time since we had left home.

A week before Christmas an uninvited guest arrived. She came with high fever, stomach ache and diarrhea, and blossomed into an epidemic of typhoid fever. During the first few days, one room at the hospital was set aside for those suspected of having the disease. Later, more and more women had to be separated. The Germans were getting scared. For the safety of the rest of the Haftlings, the Hauptschar sent those positively identified by the Weltner as having typhoid, to an abandoned barrack on the outskirts of the town. They were housed in an unheated barrack without running water, and accompanied by one Austrian nurse for the entire group. Since these women were no longer able to work, the Hauptschar forbade them food; only tea would be taken to them.

Like ostriches who bury their heads into the sand, we buried ourselves into the preparation of the program to avoid thinking of the deadly threat. During the morning rehearsal, while singing the background music to an aria of "Madame Butterfly," I had to run to the toilet. I had several more cramps during the day. By evening I felt feverish. Magda touched my forehead and warned she would not allow me to sing at night unless I let a nurse take my temperature. She dragged me to the hospital. A long line of women was already waiting to be examined.

"We could come back later on," I argued, but Magda insisted on staying in line with me until my turn came. Nurse Lonka took my temperature and signaled to Doctor Peltzer. They whispered a few words to each other. The doctor told me I had to remain in the hospital. She asked Magda to bring my belongings to the door.

"God damn it," I shouted.

Magda looked at me with horror in her eyes. Was it because of my illness, or because of my cursing? She left without giving me any kind of encouragement. Sarah brought my blanket and other items to the door.

"You will be all right," she said. Her eyes were soaked with tears. "I will pray for

you.” I suspected that Magda had told her about my outburst.

The nurse sent Sarah away quickly and led me to the last room of the corridor.

She opened the door and ushered me into a foul-smelling, icy room. A girl lay in one of the four beds, but I could see only a small part of her face. I staggered to the bed next to hers and sat down, feeling exhausted. My hot breath curled in front of my nose. Even though the room was cold, I perspired, probably due to my temperature.

After the nurse left, I put my belongings on the foot of the bed, kicked off my shoes and lay down on the soiled mattress.

Gazing at the dirty ceiling, I realized that there was more at stake than missing the entertainment. Gripping fear settled deeply into my heart. Among all the other fears I had experienced previously, this one was the most powerful, the most overbearing fear. I grabbed the corner of my blanket, twisted it angrily, and cried.

The girl in the next bed listened for awhile, then she said, “My name is Debora, I’m from Gyor.” Her voice was soft and musical.

“Leave me alone, I don’t feel like talking,” I snapped at her.

“I know how you feel. I arrived early this morning, and I was very scared.”

“I’m scared too. So what? Nothing is going to get me out of this godforsaken hell.”

She let out a groaning sound as if in pain. I turned toward her. She tried to rise up, exposing the rest of her face and her hat-covered head, but she fell back.

“How could you say such a horrible thing? The Lord is everywhere.”

“He isn’t here now,” I grunted, and pulled the blanket over my head.

After a few minutes of silence she asked if there was anyone here with me from my family. I uncovered my head and told her there were a few girls from my village and we had formed a so-called family.

Debora said she firmly believed the Lord picked her to be ill for a special reason.

I didn’t want to say anything nasty, so I avoided a reply by wiping my eyes and

blowing my nose.

“What’s your name?”

I introduced myself just to keep her quiet. The next thing she wanted to know was the name of my village. I told her that too.

Debora smiled. “I have heard about your father.”

I sat up with much difficulty, turned toward her and asked what she knew. She said her father was a traveling salesman, selling leather goods, and he talked often about my father, and about the hospitality he received at our house.

“Tell me your full name,” I asked, with more enthusiasm.

“Debora Singer.”

“Oh, of course. I knew your father. Please forgive me for my bad manners, but I feel miserable. I hope you understand.” I lay back in bed. She said she understood. I remembered Mr. Singer as a religious man. He observed the *Kashruth* dietary laws and wouldn’t go to any of the local eating places. He used to be one of the many Jewish salesmen who ate at our house.

I told Debora when I was a little girl her father asked me if I knew my Hebrew name. She smiled. We talked some more. Debora had with her a cousin and many of her friends from her home town. Two of them were barrack helpers and they were among the “in people” of the camp. She told me we should pray that our temperature wouldn’t rise by the morning. I was afraid to ask what would happen if it did rise.

Chapter 7

Now Meister Devil showered me with curses, then grabbed the table I was hiding underneath and tried to lift it. When he failed he kicked toward me. I saw his aim and moved away. He kicked the leg of the table. I grinned. Had he seen my face he would have burned the table down with his wrath.

He walked away. I thought he had enough, but I was wrong. He returned with a long, steel rod we used to retrieve the hollow pipes that sometimes rolled beneath the machines. The Meister jabbed the rod at me. I knew I had to do something drastic to avoid being hurt. Reaching up from the protective cover of the table, I started the engine of my machine, hoping that would distract him and I could run away even though I had no idea where I would run to.

Miraculously he seemed to change direction, maybe thinking we had already wasted too much time.

“Wait!” he yelled, and left. A few minutes later he returned with the tool box, adjusted the bit and told me to make up for lost time. I was so mesmerized I could barely move.

Michelle and her friend appeared and helped me to my chair. After the Meister left, Michelle told me the Meister actually hated the sound of our voices.

I was furious. “You should have warned me before. I would have kept my mouth shut.”

My hands were shaking as I resumed working. Lowering the drill, I feared if I made another mistake, the Meister probably would kill me. I focused all my attention to

steady my aim. Meister Devil sent over Nadia, the Russian girl, to check my material. Nadia winked at me and told the Meister the material was correct. At the end of the shift, when we were to carry the finished material into the warehouse, Nadia joined me. She held one side of my box and motioned I should hold the other side. Together we carried the box. Once inside the warehouse, she looked around and we laid the box to the side already inspected and that was about to be shipped out. She removed one of the shipping slips which already had been stamped, put it into my box and smiled.

I expressed my gratitude. She said she was glad to help. She also told me that the Meister had turned into a maniac since things were going badly for the Germans. He was a fanatical Nazi, incapable of facing defeat.

I made up my mind if Nadia wasn't there, I would drag the filled box by myself, no matter how heavy it was and switch the label. Some good did come out of my suffering after all.

Back in our room Lena examined my bruises and said they could have been worse. I told her what had happened.

"Don't tell Victoria you were thinking about the dog when you were in trouble. She would probably say from now on we should pray to the dogs," Lena said, and wiped the tears from her eyes.

By the end of January our situation got worse. Hardly a day passed when someone wasn't brutally assaulted. The Hauptschar fussed over little things that never used to bother him before, such as airing our rooms. He even yelled at his beloved Gretl, accusing her of getting soft on us. Gretl jumped at the Aufseherinen and in turn she accused them of the same. Lena heard Aufseherin Trude telling the other one that she wished she could go home to her family.

The punishments became more severe. If someone moved or talked during Zahlappell, she was forbidden her food ration. Anyone caught laughing during an air

raid had to stand an extra hour at attention in the snow, while the rest of us were allowed to go to sleep. If anyone was seen going near an Italian, her hair was cut off.

In the early part of February it seemed babies were born almost every day. Some of the young mothers were having their first infants, and even though most of them were alone and without relatives to comfort them, they behaved admirably.

One of the hospital rooms was converted into a nursery. It was scrubbed clean and tables were set up. On the top of the tables, sparkling clean ammunition crates lined with small straw sacks, were used for cribs, and the newborns slept peacefully.

Those women who had spent several years in various concentration camps said the babies were going to be gassed. Since there were no gas chambers at our camp, we hoped and prayed that these innocent babes would have a chance to survive until the liberation, that had to be near.

The new mothers were sent into the factory to work a few days after giving birth. I visited the nursery each day to look at the babies and asked the nurses to let me feed them with powdered milk and warm water. Because my outfit was more than dirty, I was allowed only to gaze at the babies. Their weak, little voices added a gentle sound to the brutal surroundings.

Then one day, the Hauptschar notified Berta that after the last baby had been born, they were going to be shipped to a camp called Bergen-Belsen, but their mothers would stay and work. Only those women who were still pregnant could accompany the baby transport. I wondered how any mother could bear the pain when their babies were taken away, and they were not able to go with them. The agony of separation tortured our hearts.

Some of the young women had their sisters or mother with them in the camp. One woman had to leave her teenage daughter behind. Everybody cried, and prayed

and cried some more, to no avail.

To add to our sorrow, the Hauptschar announced that those with long hospital records would also be shipped out with the babies. He was willing to feed only those strong enough to work.

The Weltner was responsible for selecting who would be leaving. Families were divided still more and hysteria raged throughout the camp.

For having such frequent chest pains, Edit was one of those selected to be shipped away. Magda begged the Weltner to allow us to join her. Lena heard about it and argued that her sister had no right to decide over our lives, that each member of the family should be given a chance to choose. The Hauptschar and the Weltner had so many people begging them to change their decree, they had to go over the list and pick out those who appeared to be healthier. Lilla pinched Edit's face several times to give her a healthy appearance, and Edit was selected to stay with us.

In Irma's room a woman had her three sisters with her, but still didn't give birth. The elders of the camp combined their knowledge to force her labor, so the woman could stay with her sisters. They offered varying degrees of advice, such as lifting a heavy tea kettle, which usually was carried by two women, or having the doctors force the labor. Finally, a few hours before the train with boxcars pulled in, she delivered. Thus, she could stay with her sisters. The baby was wrapped in rags, put into a box and was readied for the trip.

Berta and one of the doctors were to accompany the transport. The helpers begged the German women in the factory for a few sheets of paper and a pen to make a list of names to send with Berta to Bergen-Belsen, just in case someone's relative was there. I was working my factory shift at that time and I couldn't see the embarking. Those who did, said I was lucky as the tragic parting scene was the worst a human being was forced to endure.

According to our sacred Torah, it is forbidden to remove an egg from a bird's nest when the mother is present, or take away a calf while the mother is looking on. It seemed God was working overtime to punish his favorite people.

Berta and the doctor returned a few days later and assured the mothers that the babies were put into a nursery. Later, Elli revealed to us the truth that most of the babies froze to death before arriving at Bergen-Belsen. Two were trampled on by the guards while disembarking.

Berta brought back a list with her. There were no Hungarian names on it. One Polish girl found the name of her sister she believed dead, and she was overjoyed by the news.

At the end of February the toilet at the factory was being built up like those in the barracks, as if the Germans expected us to stay there indefinitely.

Jadviga, the Polish girl, tried to escape with her Italian boyfriend. She was brought back, but nobody heard of Mario again. The rest of the Italians spent their free time in jail. They were allowed only to leave for work, and they, too, were under heavy guard.

One Aufseherinen had seen a girl from our room talking to a Meister after the air raid siren had blown. She was punished by not getting her bread portion that had now shrunk to six persons per loaf.

In the factory every able-bodied man was replaced by very old, crippled men. Some had to be wheeled to work. One day Meister Devil was absent. When we saw him the next day, he was wearing a military uniform. He was replaced by a one-eyed Meister, walking with two canes. He was a mild-mannered man, harmed no one and was glad to be alive.

The atmosphere in the camp and the factory was now so tense we could feel the storm brewing. The sun had lots of company in the sky which was crowded with fighter planes. The air raids became so frequent that even Lena, a sound sleeper, couldn't fall asleep anymore. The beds shook, the window rattled, and the floor bounced.

The Germans were constantly arguing with each other, but when talking with us, they acted as if all was well. To make our stay appear more permanent, we were ordered to dig up the earth around the barracks and told soon we would be planting bushes. Peeking inside the open windows, we saw empty rooms, and only one doctor was inside. Even the nurses had been sent into the bomb factory.

Aufseherin Ilse's hands shook from nervousness as she stood by to make sure we did a good job. As it happened, a stocky, young woman with reddish brown hair, watched how Lena and I were digging. The woman laughed and said she didn't mean to insult us, but she could tell neither of us knew much about gardening. She had come over to show us. While working side-by-side, I asked her name and where she had learned this kind of work. She said her name was Irene, and she was raised on a farm. By the time we had finished the work, Lena and I had befriended Irene and asked her to join our family. Irene was pleased. She was a caring and unselfish person. She would surprise us and take over our chores, such as washing our stockings while we slept, or shared the food she received for working at the military barracks. Irene had a good sense of humor and she believed our liberation was only a matter of weeks away.

In the meantime the Nazis continued to pretend business was as usual. The Weltner asked if any of us needed dental work. She would accompany the lady dentist of our camp to the town's dental office. This was the first I heard we had our own dentist. She was Dr. Kerekes, a tiny woman with big, blue eyes and black hair. She

gave me a checkup and found two small cavities. The Weltner put my name on the list. From our room Kati was also selected.

On the way to town, the Weltner told Dr. Kerekes about the latest dental techniques. I recalled what my father once said, that when the time came and all was lost the Nazis would hide the truth from the world. I feared eventually they would destroy the evidence, meaning, us Jews, so we couldn't testify against their hideous crimes.

Close to town, the Weltner left us with the guard and she returned to the camp. As we walked along the main street, Dr. Kerekes called our attention to the dozens of posters about the *Volkssturm* (people's storm) plastered on the walls of the buildings. She was reminded of past Hungarian history when centuries before, when the king was losing the war, he called upon the farmers to fight with whatever tools they had. I remember a picture in a history book where the very young and very old held picks, axes and hoes, and were fighting at the side of the army.

"Does this mean that the mighty German army is down so low that even the farm equipment is needed at the battle lines?" Kati asked.

"This is good news indeed," the doctor replied.

After arriving at the local dentist's house we had to wait in the hallway. When it was my turn to sit in the dental chair, I was amazed by the modern tools. At my village the dentist had to use a foot pedal to run the drill; at this office it ran by an electric motor. The local dentist stood behind Dr. Kerekes. She told him the way we were treated at the camp.

The German dentist said he found that hard to believe as they were told that the Haftlings were paid just like the others for their work. He also said the people in the town heard that the Haftlings were treated well. Now we knew that the Germans lied even to each other.

Dr. Kerekes had light hands. She worked very efficiently even though the instruments were new to her. My two cavities were fixed quickly.

While waiting for the others, Kati and I had walked down the corridor and discovered the toilet. It was such a novelty, such a thrill to be able to lock the door behind us, that just for the fun of it we made more trips than was necessary. Our guard grew cross and warned us not to go in anymore or he'd give us a beating. Then he turned around, and we could tell his shoulders shook from laughing.

We walked slowly back to camp, trying to read all the warning signs. The barricades built in front of each building made it unmistakably clear that the Germans expected the worst. Dr. Kerekes was sure if the Hauptschar had known about the conditions, he would have had second thoughts about letting us walk through the town.

Back at our room, we found Lena and Irene black as chimney sweepers. Gretl had made them clean out the furnace and pick up every bit of coal so it could be used for us in the next winter.

It rained frequently in March. The water seeped into my worn-out shoes. When I walked I felt like I was wading in a slushy mud puddle.

Sarah celebrated her birthday. Her wish was for a new pair of shoes. It so happened one day after her birthday a load of new wooden shoes arrived and Sarah's wish was granted. I was also lucky enough to get a pair.

Sarah received other gifts, too. Lena made her a well-fitting ring she had carved from a hollow aluminum pipe. Sarah remarked she would wear it so proudly as if it were made of pure gold. The other gifts were an onion from Edit and Lilla, and a long carrot from Anni and Terri. Magda and Victoria made Sarah a little salt shaker, and

Irene gave her a spoonful of salt. I saved two portions of my bread to be given to Sarah, as I was working in a different shift that time.

I was told that Sarah was pleased with her gifts, yet she had cried very hard. This was her first birthday she had celebrated without her family.

The next day Lena, Irene and I were called to help unload a small truck that had arrived from the town. As we strained our muscles to lift off a machine, Berta asked if any of us recognized it. I told her it looked like a shoe repair machine.

“Who are they kidding, pretending all is well at the camp and we could be looking forward to a long stay?”

When we lifted off a barber chair, Berta laughed so loud that the guard came over to investigate. He wanted to know what was going on. Berta said she would also be needing a manicure.

He called Berta a stupid ass.

She remarked those things were so ridiculous, it was just like painting over the cracks where the walls were collapsing.

I told her pretty soon I would also need a new paint job. My legs were spindly, my ankles swollen. The skin over my entire body was covered with red bumps as if I were a special specie of human being. Not white, not red, but white with red polka dots. Were I offered a mirror, I would avoid looking into it. I was told I had black circles under my eyes, and with my bloated belly, my figure was like a spider's. My bones were piercing my skin, and I was afraid soon they would break through.

My left arm had a lump of a muscle, my right arm had none. I dared not think how might I look in a short sleeve dress or in a bathing suit.

Then came my birthday. I recalled the family celebrations and this made the day even more unbearable. My kind and thoughtful friends tried to sweeten the day by presenting me with similar gifts Sarah had received. After returning from work, I found

a small layer cake of thin slices of bread sitting on the top of my bed. It was a work of art, decorated with a tiny rosebud Magda formed from a lump of bread. It must have been very hard for my friends to save up for that many layers. I shared it with Lena and Irene, as the others were in the factory. They kissed me, wished me luck, and I cried myself into a headache. I felt loud pounding on my brain and the same pounding continued throughout the night. I could still hear it in the morning during Zahlappell.

As we were lined up to be counted I heard Anni Katz telling her mother that she had a pounding in her head. Mrs. Katz hushed her down, saying she had a noisy imagination.

"Pardon me for intruding into a family argument, but I, too, experience a similar headache and also hear a pounding."

"Mind your own business," Mrs. Katz snapped back. Anni glanced at me with thankful eyes.

During the lunch period the pounding became louder and I was relieved when everyone else complained about the noise. Even though there was no air raid warning, the sound was similar to that when we had heard the bombings. Being sure that the noise was no longer only in my head, I went back to Mrs. Katz and asked if she still thought we had imagined the noise. Mrs. Katz admitted that Anni had an extra-keen sense of hearing.

One minute after the lunch break, the siren sounded. Unable to mask their true feelings, the Germans scattered in utter confusion. Some even didn't bother to turn off the lights or the machines. The women left their purses on their desks. The Meisters ran out in the main aisle without washing the oil off their hands, bumping into each other, swearing. Being used to an orderly evacuation, we were astonished by the bewildered expression on their faces and by their irrational behavior. We viewed their confusion with pleasure. We strolled out casually, waiting for the guards to "loss, loss"

us out, but they didn't show up.

Soon, low-flying planes appeared and swooped over the factory, spraying the roof with bullets. The German women fell on their knees and actually prayed. We stood transfixed, gaping at them with awe. None of us had seen a German praying before.

"I bet God is surprised," Lena said.

We were leaving the main aisle when suddenly, through the roof, a spray of machine gun fire hit the wall. It came so close that now we understood what the panic was about. We dropped down on our stomachs and stared at each other. This wasn't the way the game was supposed to be played.

Lena crawled close to me and we prayed together. Soon the air raid was over, and still the dust and the smell of destruction hovered in the air. The German women gathered and begged the owner of the factory to let them go home to their families. He talked them out of it while looking at us. He warned them to control themselves in front of the Haftlings.

No one was harmed although the bullets had no eyes and could have hit anyone of us. It was still a good show, and worthwhile to see the Nazis being scared for a change.

When the second shift arrived for work, Edit stopped at my machine and told me the guards had left their posts for the first time since our arrival, and had run for shelter. That was really news. No soldier was ever permitted to think of his own safety above his duty. I wished I could have been there to see them acting like human beings.

March 19th was the first anniversary of the onset of our affliction, the day the German armies marched into Hungary. Who had dreamed how every moment of our lives would be filled with fear? How every moment we would court death, and every moment we were saved to suffer and fear another moment.

I met Debora in the factory during the night shift. She reminded me that Passover soon would start and asked if I was going to keep it.

"You mean, not eating bread?" I asked.

"Our rations is so small, now seven person to a loaf, it would be easy to do without it.," she answered.

"If God wants me to keep the Passover, He has to help me."

We saw the guard approach my machine, and Debora ducked quickly. When he was no longer in sight, Deborah stood up and told me I was wrong, I must make every effort to keep the holiday. It commemorated the liberation of Jews from the Egyptian bondage.

"I'm willing to do my share and say the "MAH NISH TANAH" from my imaginary Haggadah, if someone would hold a *SEDER* during an air raid."

_ must have sensed my disillusionment. Her face grew dark, but she still kept calm.

"The Almighty could perform miracles for us as he has done for our ancestors."

"Oh, yes, and I suppose Berta is going to be our Moses and lead us out from this wretched place while the Nazis fall into the Red Sea."

Debora turned away from me. She picked up a screw from my box and pounded with it on the side of the machine. Then she turned back and faced me. Her lips were trembling and her body was shaking with emotion.

"I'm surprised to hear you talk so cynically about our religion."

"Forgive me. Those *SEDER*S I spent with my family came to my mind." I wiped the tears off with my dirty hands. She patted me on the shoulder.

"I understand, but with the Almighty's help, a miracle can happen. Trust Him. It will come. You'll see." She left, and I continued drilling small holes into a big problem.

I could hear the pounding again. Now it sounded like machine guns. The rattling

and the bombs bursting continued for the rest of the night.

Chapter 8

Friday, March 23, Lena was called to do some work at the German barracks. When she returned she told us the soldiers were packing their gear. The news spread quickly in our barracks and we expected an order to leave, yet nobody said anything about packing. Rumors were rife. The guessing game continued frantically. What were the Nazis going to do with us? Leave us here? And if they did, in what condition? Dead or alive? What method were they going to use to kill us?

“Line us up at the wall and shoot us,” one person said.

I remembered back at our synagogue, when the Nazi officer amused himself and asked which of us wanted to be the first one to be shot.

“They won’t shoot us. Bullets are too expensive,” another person said. “They would lock us up in the barracks and set it afire.”

“I’m sure our food is going to be poisoned,” we heard from another mouth. From that moment on, we watched each other to see who would taste the food first. Every meal was a ghastly experience. Someone else said that we were going to be shipped to Bergen-Belsen and be killed there. Another offered that as the Allies got closer, the Nazis would use us for a shield.

Every group and every family had its own version of how our end would come. Now it was our turn to panic. The earth trembled beneath our feet, and we felt the trembling in the marrow of our bones.

Berta tried hard to keep us calm, but it was difficult. She, a dreamer like I was, tried to convince the women that they would wake up one morning and see British

in the guardhouse. When the sound of shooting continued, we relaxed. When it stopped, we feared that our liberators were pushed back.

On Saturday, March 24, the guessing game ended. As our shift was getting ready to go into the factory we saw two wagons loaded with supplies standing near the railroad tracks. One of them had a horse hitched to it. Inside the factory the electricity was not only running through the machines, but also in the air and through the bodies of all the people. That day, the Meisters didn't make their rounds to check the material. The German women workers walked from machine to machine. They talked to each of us, as if they were sorry, or at least concerned about what they knew would happen to us. Meister Carface approached my department. He stopped nearby and looked at me. I felt as if he wanted to talk. He raised his arm for a moment and said, "*Kleine*" (meaning "little"), and waved. His eyes were dark and hazy as if he had some regrets. Maybe it was only wishful thinking on my part for him to repent his excess cruelty, whose reason still baffled me. I waved back at him. In every compartment the Russian girls were crying and the Italians talked to us and didn't care who saw them.

During the lunch period we were taken back to the barracks. The night shifters were up and busy, emptying the straw sack mattresses onto the middle of the rooms. The sacks were then cut up and sewn into back packs. Sarah was making a back pack for me. She was worried that I might not have time to do it when I got back after work. The women talked about departure, even though nobody knew when that would be.

My family and many of my roommates gave me their soup bowls which I took to the factory and drilled holes into their rims, so they could be hung by the sides of the back packs. It took me a long while to drill through so many bowls. The Meister saw me, but didn't object. I noticed the girls in my department taking souvenirs. They picked

up files, pipes, screws and small tools. I didn't take anything. I had an ugly scar on my thumb to show where I had been.

Several Italians from my former department came over and shook my hand and wished me luck. Also the two Russian girls came and hugged me. I walked into the toilet for the last time. The room was almost completed, and even had its own lights overhead. When I lined up on the main aisle I could see my old department. The Meister smiled at me unmistakably. And he waved again, this time much longer.

"It's too late now, you old Carpfacer, you could have been a *Mensch*, while I was still there with you." I said this in German loud enough for him to hear, and none of the Germans reprimanded me.

There was no pushing and shoving at the punch clock. None of the Aufseherinnen was kicking us today. We walked out of the mouth of the dragon, not looking back. The doors closed and kept the foul odor and torment behind.

Inside the barracks the pace quickened. Women were running back and forth in the corridors, and in and out of their rooms. There wasn't much conversation anywhere. Each of us was baffled by the same unspoken question and none of us knew the answer. Every five minutes someone would run to the front door, which faced the railroad tracks, to see if the boxcars had arrived.

"Not yet," the person would yell.

After awhile it became apparent that no boxcars were coming, and we feared that the packing was only a trick to distract us from the inevitable truth of our speedily approaching end. The Aufseherinnen kept urging us to get ready.

I distributed the bowls and the owners hung them up with a string at the side of the backpacks and secured them tightly, only to realize that we had not had dinner. We had packed away our spoons, the soap, the towel and now we had to unpack them.

Berta appeared at the end of the corridor and asked if anyone knew how to tie up

the blankets military style. I shouted I knew. She told me to go into each room and show how it was done. I thought I would tell this to my father when I saw him again. I had resented learning to do things I had seen no use for, but Father urged me to learn whatever I could, since one never knows when it could become useful, he would always say. Unlike wealth, knowledge could never be taken from us.

...I was exhausted from working and this extra effort made it worse, yet I couldn't refuse to help. Magda asked Berta to appoint someone else who already had learned it from me. She obliged and I was glad. I headed toward the bathroom. The lines were very long. This time, no guards paced by the broken window to watch us wash. Quickly, the naked bodies melted into the crowded corridors. I only had a sliver of soap to wash off the factory dirt.

For our last meal the worst of the oxenruben soup was served. It was practically sour, and thin, without any potatoes, hardly worthwhile soiling our bowls. Yet as usual, we gulped it down to the last lousy drop, washed our bowls and tied them up again. I packed my meager belongings including one portion of bread I always saved for emergencies.

Zahlappell had been called. We were ordered to hold our lines and march out the gate. The first ten rows already had passed the tracks when Berta screamed that we hadn't brought any of our things with us. We rushed back and waded through the crushed straw, grabbed our bags and blankets and lined up again.

We marched out the gate.

Victoria glanced back and spat out her invective as soon as we were on the outside. I thought how nice it had been to be with Lena and Irene who were not contaminated by Victoria's vile manner.

We slowed down at the railroad tracks, but were ordered to keep going. We looked back at the tracks, thinking the boxcars were late in arriving. We feared the

future, yet it was a relief to see the guardhouse, the dirty barracks and the fence all behind us. We marched by the factory and rounded the corner of the building to the entrance none of us had seen before. A large German flag waved in the breeze. A dozen old-timers stood by. They wore no uniforms, and they were armed.

“They are our honor guards and will give us a farewell reception,” I said.

“Yes, and the president of the factory will come out to shake hands with each of us and give us our paychecks,” Lilla said.

“And they are going to present us with a bouquet of flowers,” Terri said, and laughed.

“No talking,” warned one of the old guards, who had a large bump on his red nose.

“Go home, old horse, and fuck your fat mother,” Victoria replied. This was the first and only German sentence she had uttered since our captivity. Fortunately for her, the old boy must have been deaf, because he didn’t respond.

The Hauptschar joined us and gave one of his old speeches, blah...blah...blah... He spiced it with some Westfalian swear words and told us that if one of us escapes, twenty would be shot. Blah...blah...blah... He stopped abruptly in mid-sentence. The horse pulled up with the loaded wagon. Loaves of bread were unloaded and fifty women were each given one loaf to carry, and warned that the bread was for everyone. If one were missing, the one who carried it would be severely punished. “Severely punished, severely punished.” I mimicked him, wishing that worn-out record would already break.

Gretl selected a group of girls to pull the other wagon as if they were horses. The rest of us were ordered up to the road and to march. Our wooden shoes clapped so loudly on the pavement that the guards nearest the lines told us to take it easy. Soon the barracks and the factory disappeared into the shadows.

"It was only a bad dream," Magda exclaimed.

"Hey, Victoria, how about a final blessing on those whom we left behind," Lilla teased.

Victoria took a deep breath and said in German, "May the blood of Regina drip over your heads forever and plagues devour you and your children's flesh for generations to come." And the rest of us roared, "Amen."

One guard, near our line, shook his finger at us. As the night turned darker, I felt more like praying than cursing.

"God, may this night be different than any other night." I said the words of the Haggada, and added, "The morning should bring us to liberation."

Spring was in the air. A mild breeze ruffled my growing hair. I felt at peace. The presence of God surrounded me. The march began into the dark, uncertain German night.

The Aufseherinen and the guards marched with us. The Hauptschar was the only one who rode a bicycle. He pedaled fast and expected the rest of us to keep up with him. Gretl dared to speak up and begged the Hauptschar to slow down.

The old civilian guard accompanied us for a while, and then they returned to the town. We believed that we were going to the railroad station and the marching became easier. One third of the women, like myself, had a hard night's work behind us, without having had any rest, yet the thought of being able to sit in a boxcar gave us strength to keep up the pace with those who had slept during the night. Terri had been at the freight yard to pick up supplies, and remarked that we weren't heading toward it. We passed houses that had been barricaded as if they were expecting street fights and hand-to-hand combat. There were no people on the streets. Even the dogs were silent. What we could hear was the burst of gunfire behind us.

The sky was dark and ominous. The moon hid behind the clouds. Ghostlike

shadows glided among the trees. We were led up to a tall, white building with four columns which had the appearance of a museum. The Hauptschar went inside while we waited. He returned with an officer shorter in stature and higher in rank. He resembled the pudgy, old fashioned burghers on painted beer mugs.

His instruction was for us to draw back behind the building, inside the fenced-in yard, and face a line-up of tanks.

“This is the way we are going to end,” Lilla whispered.

“Why?” Anni cried. “Just when we are so close to being liberated.”

“My parents died like this,” a Polish girl moaned, her body shaking uncontrollably. Her remark rumbled through the lines and muffled crying filled the yard.

Edit declared she was about to faint. Doctor Peltzer rushed over and told her to get hold of herself.

“What would happen if we scattered around? Surely they would miss shooting some of us,” I said, but received no reply from anyone. I felt hot and numb. What should be my last wish? “Shema Yisroel.” My daze didn’t last long. I heard the tramping of marching boots from the road down below the building.

The moon was coming out from behind the clouds. Through the narrow slits of the pickets we could see hundreds of wounded soldiers dragging their bodies. A forest of white bandages drifted by.

Our guards used their bayonets to chase us away from the fence and move us further behind the building. It was obvious they were trying to hide their bloody retreat from us.

After the army of wounded soldiers passed, we drifted back to the fence, and saw civilians carrying bundles on their backs, pulling small carts, pushing baby buggies loaded with goods, and appearing very much like we did when we had left our homes an eternity ago.

“See who is running now,” Magda remarked.

“This is God’s justice,” Sarah said. “Now they know how the rest of Europe feels because of them.”

“Serves them right,” Magda concluded. I saw sleepy, little children’s heads bobbing up and down on their mothers’ shoulders. Other youngsters could barely keep up the pace and hung onto their mothers’ skirts. I thought of my cousin, Juli, and felt sorry for these children.

After this slovenly group had passed, the Hauptschar descended to spy the road. A few minutes later he motioned for us to follow him. The road led into the woods. It was much darker there. Magda decided to edge herself close to the Polish soldier and ask if he knew where we were going.

The Polish soldier had company. None of the soldiers, or the Aufseherinnen, were walking alone. Maybe the Hauptschar mistrusted his own people and made sure they guarded each other.

The guessing game about our destination continued for awhile, then we gave it up altogether. It began to be more like sheep following the leader without knowing.

Again, we saw a group of wounded soldiers approaching. Some were carried on stretchers. There was only one small vehicle behind them and that, too, was laden with maimed bodies. When the Hauptschar noticed the soldiers, he ordered the guards to chase us off the road and into the muddy side road. So we continued our march among large farmhouses on either side of the road. When the pounding of guns subsided for a moment, we were allowed to sit down to catch our breath. After a short rest, the march commenced again.

“My mother would never allow me to march like this,” Terri said to Sarah.

“I wonder how the older women can keep up this pace,” Magda replied.

By cursing and pushing the women with the back of their rifles, the soldiers saw to

it that they did keep up.

Lilla complained that the damp night air was creeping into her joints and causing her pain. She begged the guard to let her sit down and leave her by the roadside.

I encouraged her to hold on, saying, she had a date to keep with a handsome doctor. Lilla continued walking for awhile without complaining, then she cried again. We took turns holding her up under her arms. She wobbled and moaned with every step.

Anni recalled the time her father would take her for long hikes in the woods, and taught her the beauty and love of nature.

Edit said she'd like to see the surprised expression on my mother's face when she would hear about this long hike. Since Emery's death Mother allowed me to go only for short walks. She always was afraid something dreadful would happen to me.

Victoria reminisced about her boyfriend, she had never talked about before. He was a high-ranking army officer in his early forties whom Victoria had met at a military parade. She used to tease him for riding on his horse in front of the foot soldiers, while they had to march many kilometers, carrying their knapsacks on their backs, trying to keep up with the horse. She said if she would ever get out of here and meet him again she would push him right off his high horse and let him see how it felt to trudge behind a horse.

We stared at her with shocked amazement. Unlike the rest of us, until now she never talked about having had a boyfriend. What was more shocking was she said if she "would ever get out of here."

"Tell us what else you are planning on doing if we get out of here?" asked Sarah most sincerely.

"Eh, we will never get out of here alive." Victoria refused to let herself join those

who walked with hope. We were so disappointed.

On Sunday, March 25, after daybreak we saw big, cumulus clouds in the sky.

“Sooner or later those clouds are going to turn into paratroopers,” I dreamed aloud.

“Can you imagine the kind of shooting reception they would receive?” Lena shook me back to reality.

“I’m hungry. I wish we were back at the factory. At least there I knew when the night was over and I would get something to eat,” Victoria grumbled.

“Here, this will keep your mouth busy,” Sarah said, and handed a slice of stale bread to Victoria. “I saved it for such a time like this.”

Victoria gaped at it, and gulped it down. Sarah gave a thin slice of bread to each member of the family. It only made us ever more hungry.

The sun rose higher and the fragrance of the dew-covered farmland invigorated even those who felt there was no hope. The two-story farmhouses were picturesque. Irene compared them to simple farmhouses she had seen back home. As the countryside awakened, the farmers emerged and looked at the sky. Stretching their arms, they might even have thought of God. The land appeared to be so pure and peaceful. More peaceful than we wished for. We gazed at another with terror. Had the Nazis succeeded in pushing back the Allies?

“They are never going to catch up with us,” Victoria moaned.

“Don’t be silly,” Lena said. “Just how long do you think it would take an army vehicle to travel the distance we had walked during the night?”

“Not if they were retreating,” Edit lamented.

Lilla was so exhausted she said she may never see another sunrise. I wanted to stop her pessimism before it spread among us, and I encouraged her to trust in God, who sustained us so far.

“Ever since you had spent time at the hospital with the Orthodox girl you too sound

like a *rebbetzin* (rabbi's wife)

“Hush up and smell the grass,” Irene said.

We neared a large, clean, lovely farmhouse. Dark brown, wooden beams were built into the white brick walls. Green shutters graced the windows and colorful curtains peeked out. A white trellis and a picket fence added to its overall charm.

The Hauptschar told the guard to halt us while he knocked on the front door. A husky man opened the farmhouse door. They talked for awhile. The man, probably the owner of the farm, came out and opened the gate of what seemed to be a large barn. We were herded inside like a group of animals. The barn was loaded with straw and we beat up the dust as we entered.

The Aufseherinen made us line up inside the barn for Zahlappell. They had trouble with the counting as everybody was sneezing and coughing. Finally, when that was over, several loaves of bread were brought into the barn and the helpers stepped forward to divide the bread among us. However, Gretl informed them, that since we were no longer in the camp, the helpers were no longer in charge. Instead, she handed the bread to two women standing near the door who parceled it out to us. We each received a small piece of bread and we were told to go to sleep.

We devoured the bread, pushed the straw apart, made ourselves a nest, and collapsed.

There wasn't enough room for everybody to lay down, so some of the girls climbed up on a ladder into the loft. The loft had cracks on the floor and the straw fell down whenever someone up there made a move.

“Would you please settle down,” Magda shouted. “We are choking from the dust.”

We heard giggling and French talk, and the dust and straw bits continued to fall.

“Damn you, stop it at once, or I'll come up and give you a thrashing.” Magda became angrier.

The girls upstairs just laughed. Magda jumped up and shook some of the straw off her body.

“Who want to help me beat up the Mademoiselles?” she asked. By then we knew she was serious.

I was breathing through my mouth and it was full with straw bits and dust. I was in the right mood to fight.

“I’m with you,” I shouted, and stood up.

Sarah tried to talk me out of going, warning me that the French girls were twice my size. Since I wouldn’t listen to her, she decided to give Magda and me some reinforcement. The three of us climbed up the ladder. We saw the French girls were lined up by a crack of the wall that connected the barn with another building. Michelle signaled to me to peek in. I saw a smaller room packed with straw. On top of a large bale lay Gretl and the Hauptschar, on top of her. He wore long, gray underwear and moved his body as if he wanted to drill through Gretl and down into the straw. I was embarrassed and stepped back. The French girls giggled even more. When Magda peeked, her face turned paprika red. She looked away and bawled out the French girls for exposing me to such a vulgar sight.

They ignored her and returned to the wall. Magda was so excited she forgot to ask the girls to stop moving about.

Sarah, curious about why Magda was upset, pushed one of the girls away from the crack of the wall, and she looked too.

“What’s so funny about Gretl sleeping on the straw?” she asked.

“You’ve missed it,” Magda said, and climbed down the ladder. I heard her telling the others what we had seen, and my friends laughed for awhile. Then we fell asleep.

We had slept for several hours when Anni woke us up. She had been looking for a toilet and the guard ushered her to the garbage dump near the pigsty. On her way

back she picked up a large, half-rotten potato. She cut off the bad part and asked if any of us would like to share the rest. Terri took one bite and spit out the raw potato. Sarah also braved herself. She, too, spit it out. Anni ate the rest of the potato without a wince.

Debora joined us later and said Passover would start Wednesday at dawn, and the Almighty could bring about a miracle for our sakes. Victoria told her to preach elsewhere. Debora stood firmly and explained to Victoria that someday soon, the Lord would make her change her heart and mind.

“Sure, sure,” Victoria spat back. “In the meantime, He lets me starve to death.”

I tried to smooth out the situation and begged Debora to overlook Victoria's outburst.

“Shut up! You sound just like my poor cousin, Regina. Who asked you to stick up for me?”

I bit my lips and Debora rejoined her group.

Sunday at dusk we were told to get up and move on. It felt good to inhale the fresh air after being locked up all day long in the dusty barn. The countryside was quiet. This night was brighter than the previous night. We could see even from a distance a group of young boys marching toward the direction we had come from. Some were so small they could hardly carry their rifles. Anni remarked the boys were going to be fed to the lions. Edit said if she were their mother she wouldn't allow them to go into battle. Lena said the Germans were crazy. As they were nearing, I sized up the boys and thought of my cousin, Lacko. Would he be able to carry a heavy rifle and shoot, when he couldn't even kill an ant?

To make the marching worse, it drizzled lightly, and then it poured. The Germans put on their water repellent, tent like raincoats and urged us to keep up the pace. We had to stop for a short while because the horse couldn't see ahead through the thick curtain of rain. As the horse was led under a shelter, we were told to sit on the side of

the road. Each time a vehicle rolled by we got drenched with mud. We unrolled our blankets and covered ourselves.

To reward us for our night-long suffering, the machine gunning resumed. We spent Monday in a tractor barn. There wasn't any straw to lie on. Our blankets were still soaking wet. The farmer complained that we tracked too much dirt into the barn. The Hauptschar told him there was no other place to put us up.

When it became darker the Hauptschar discovered Aufseherin Herta was missing. Terri had found the discarded uniform behind the barn. The Hauptschar grabbed the uniform, without making any remark. The news of the missing Aufseherin spread quickly and it gave us hope that sooner or later all of our guards would desert.

The Hauptschar called the Aufseherinen and the guards together behind the barn. Although he tried to control his anger he shouted loud enough for us to hear. He said he would shoot anyone who tried to escape.

Magda said he would need a long range rifle to hit Herta who had run away several hours earlier.

Monday night we were ordered to line up for marching, but the shooting was so intense that we were chased back into the barn.

The pudgy officer appeared from behind one of the buildings and he conversed with the Hauptschar near the barn. We laid our heads close to the wall to hear what transpired.

"This wouldn't have happened if you had listened to me," yelled the beer mug-type officer. "In January, when I led twelve thousand women out of Auschwitz, we didn't lose one soldier, and the Russians couldn't catch up with us. It is your fault that we are in a mess now. You should have investigated the terrain more thoroughly before taking this route. If you know what's good for you, you'd better listen to me from now on, or I'll

report you and you will no longer be in charge of anything.”

The Hauptschar grunted some kind of an excuse, and what he said wasn't quite audible. Anyway, we were glad that for once someone was bawling him out. When we talked over the January march from Auschwitz, fear gripped our hearts, thinking perhaps some of our relatives might have been marching in the merciless cold.

No sooner did the officer disappear when one of the Aufseherinen came running and shouting that Ilse had poisoned herself. Ilse was one of the worst of the Aufseherinen, who kicked us frequently. Gretl rushed behind the building.

The Hauptschar and the others followed. Gretl begged the Hauptschar to let her call the Austrian Doctor Engel. He forbade it. Ilse kicked no more.

The barn floor was hard, and we were cold and wet. The odor of our bodies made me think of wet cats. Despite our exhaustion, not many of us could sleep.

Irene touched my arm and said where there was a farm, there had to be straw or hay, and asked if I would be willing to help her look for some. We felt our way in the darkness, climbing over the sleeping bodies until we reached a wooden wall. Irene discovered a couple of loose planks., She pried one open, pushed it aside and found the straw. She told me to pull aside the other plank. As I reached toward the wood with both hands, my left index finger snagged on a nail. It didn't seem to hurt much and I managed to climb inside. We loaded up with hay and battered our way back as each person who awakened, grabbed away a handful. Then we heard a cry in the darkness, “Someone stepped on my ear.”

Irene said she thought she did it, and we scurried further away. The spot we had lain previously, was occupied by someone else. It had closed up and there was no place to put down the straw. While feeling our way Terri whispered she was laying beneath a cart and there was room for us beside her.

“Never mind coming here,” she suddenly shouted. “It is raining down on me.” She

was swearing and spitting. "Someone is peeing on my head."

A body jumped out from the cart and disappeared in the darkness. Victoria awoke and told us there was some room near her. She stretched her arms out and felt around to make sure there was enough space for both of us.

"God damn it. An idiot with diarrhea did it right here."

A young girl, near Victoria's feet, sat up and begged her to be quiet. Victoria pulled off her wooden shoe and struck the girl.

"Mommie, tell this demon that I couldn't have done it. I have been constipated for several days," the girls cried.

...The mother sat up and hit Victoria with her fist. Then both women shouted swear words at each other until the guards rushed in and with their fixed bayonets, jabbed around in the darkness, not looking where or what they hit. Lying close to the door, Magda was stabbed in the leg. She pleaded with the soldier not to hurt her anymore. Lena threw herself over her sister's body. She was hit on the head with the butt of a rifle and let out a painful shriek. Many others were hit too, and while trying to get out of the angry soldiers' way, several girls were injured.

The guards withdrew quickly because they saw the Hauptschar approach. He must have been worried. In his haste, had not time to dress and wore only his underwear.

... the soldiers retreated Dr. Peltzer crawled over to Magda and used her handkerchief to stop the bleeding and bandage her wound. We took turns holding the bandage in its place.

On Tuesday morning, the barn resembled a battleground. Blood and excrement were spread over the floor. We had spent the day inside. Dr. Peltzer examined Magda's leg. She had a deep laceration and was in pain. The doctor also examined my finger. She sprinkled some yellow powder on the wound and covered it with a

paper bandage.

Gross/Prisoner 409

470

That night, when the marching began, Magda could barely walk. We took turns supporting her beneath both arms. Lilla needed support too, because her bones were aching. We were wobbly and weak as the day's bread ration was withheld. Magda heard the Hauptschar telling Gretl that if the trip lasted longer than planned they would be needing the bread for themselves.

During the night march, Debora and her friends recalled the Exodus from Egypt and recited pages from the Haggada. There was no need to make a decision whether to eat bread or not, as we weren't given any.

Then the Hungarian soldier ran away. No one saw him leave. The Germans were so furious they tore at each other. Gretl called the Hauptschar a stupid idiot for he was leading us in the wrong direction, and now he no longer had the power to control his men.

Friday, we were so hungry that some of us suggested chewing on the hay for food. Anni and Irene weighed the possibilities to hide in the barn when the next marching would begin, but at night, after Zahlappell, none of us had the nerve to hide. Terri cried because a nail was sticking out of the bottom of her left shoe, hurting her. Finally, she removed her shoe and hit it against the side of the barn wall, where the shoe proceeded to fall apart. We were all in agony. Sarah's ankles were swollen to double their size. Magda cried in pain. Lena said she was groggy from her head injury. My toes were full of blisters and my finger throbbed. As it happened, the marching lasted only a few minutes because machine gunning erupted nearby. Somehow I saw beauty in the firing as it flashed and lighted up the sky.

The guards chased us back into the barn, and instead of going out to fight, they closed the door behind them and stayed inside with us. The barn was shaking and through the cracks of the door we could see brilliant fireworks. Death or freedom

was very close.

"If I would yell out in English, 'Hello soldiers,' they might even hear us," Anni whispered, but then she added that she was too scared to try it. Sarah remarked that this must be a miracle. She took off her shoes and massaged her swollen ankles. Dr. Peltzer came over and re-bandaged Magda's leg and finger. We sat up for a while, facing the door, hoping to witness the glorious moment when our liberators would enter. But none of us could keep up the vigil for long, and we fell asleep. — —

— — — —

Chapter 9

The awakening on Saturday morning and finding our guards still with us brought a painful disappointment. We feared the fireworks of the night was perhaps a dream, but we saw bullet holes on the side of the main building across from the barn.

We were locked up in the barn for the rest of the day without any food. While being led outside to the dung heap we discovered a water pump. As we washed our hands, we noticed they were a different color than the rest of our bodies which were still grayish from the dirt of the road. We washed our faces too. Magda and I got clean bandages. Terri found a string and tied up her shoes. We spent the rest of the day in a dazed condition, thinking of the food the farmers might have stashed away. I dozed off from the lack of energy, and had a dream about my mother. It was Passover. She was making matzo balls. It was also Easter. To follow the local gentile custom of spraying the women with scented water, a young man rushed into the kitchen. Not only my mother but also the matzo balls were drenched and had a fragrance of violets, yet I ate them all.

At the evening Zablappell our group was separated. Sarah, Edit, Lilla, Anni, Terri, Victoria and I were hitched to one of the loaded wagons. A horse pulled the other wagon ahead of us. Rita and her daughter, Kati, Babett from their hometown, Győr, and Luisa, a seamstress from Fehérvár, were with us. We decided who would do the pulling and pushing, and also how often we would trade places. None of us had much strength to keep up with the horse who had been fed before we started. We were led

up to the highway while the rest of the group was told to walk on the muddy side road between the cow pastures.

Private Hugo sat up in front with the civilian driver and had his back to us. Luisa and Babett talked about escaping, reasoning even if the guard would turn around and shoot, some of us could escape into the nearby forest. They asked us to join their plan. Lilla volunteered to stay behind and risk being shot as she could no longer keep up the pace. The escape plan remained only a plan.

Sarah pulled Anni aside and asked what she thought about making the load lighter. Anni agreed it would be a good idea. So Sarah took out her pocket knife and slashed one of the sacks that lay on the top of the wagon. A white substance poured onto the pavement which prompted Terri to say that now she would be able to find her way back, just like in a fairy tale.

"Let's see what's pouring," I suggested, and placed my hand beneath the hole. I licked the palm of my hand and smiled. "It's sugar," I said. We took turns eating a handful. We walked on for perhaps a couple of hours when Babett said she wanted to ask Hugo to shoot her as she no longer cared to live.

"What am I going to tell your husband when he comes home from Russia and looks for you?" Rita asked. She received no answer.

Then Edit, drowning in her tears, said she was so tired she would lie down on the roadside and die.

Anni grabbed her by the arm and shook her, saying "Wait for the Yankees. Who knows, there might even be Negroes among them. Wouldn't you love to hear them sing, 'Come on and hear Alexander's ragtime band?'"

Edit stopped crying and a faint smile appeared on her face.

Sarah endured each painful step without complaining. She told me if our house was damaged by the war we could move into their house. I thanked her and offered

the same.

Dawn was rising on the horizon and we yearned for a rest. Hugo urged us on. We knew the march had to be over soon because until now the Hauptschar never let us continue during daytime. We saw farmhouses and road signs marking the distance to the next town, yet we didn't stop.

Luisa stepped out from behind the wagon, rushed up to the front and before anyone could stop her, she begged Hugo to shoot her. Babett joined, saying, she, too, wanted to die.

"Does anyone else want to be shot?" asked Hugo.

Edit stepped forward. I put out my feet and tripped her. She looked up from the pavement and said, "Thanks."

Hugo laughed so loudly that the horse turned his head to look.

"Are you crazy?" he asked. "You think either one of you is worth a bullet?"

In spite of our despair, we were relieved. The march continued between a row of bombed out houses. Some of them were still smoldering, others were aflame. We passed another road marker indicating we were entering a place called Kaunitz. Here the fires burned unattended on both sides of the street. At the crossroads on the village square we saw a building bombed to rubble. Straight ahead, viewing the destruction all about, stood a graceful, old country church.

The clock of the tower showed ten. That must have been the time of the air raid when the bombs fell around the church. Not far to the right of the church, near the fork of the road, stood a picturesque schoolhouse. Farmland stretched far into the distance. Black and white cows grazed peacefully on the dew-drenched fields. As we dragged ourselves forward, we could see tall milk cans standing in front of the farmhouses, waiting for a pick-up truck. We stopped the wagon and rushed to the cans, pried open the lid and used the top for a cup. For not having had any milk since May of the

previous year, it was a new sensation for us. In our haste the cool, sweet milk dripped down our faces. As the drops reached our neck, they became black. When Hugo climbed off the wagon, we feared he would punish us. Instead, he, too, drank some milk, and wiped his lips with the sleeve of his jacket.

I saw a half-eggshell near the can. I picked it up and asked if anyone knew what it was.

"We have milk, we have sugar. With some vanilla and a few of those you are holding, we could make a 'floating island' for breakfast," Sarah said.

"Cut it out," Babett shouted angrily.

Sarah walked on with a sad expression on her face.

We continued our march and saw a small railroad station. Thinking, now we would be able to ride instead of walk, we stopped. But Hugo turned around and told us to keep moving.

We passed by cultivated vegetable gardens behind the railroad station. Tools leaned against the low fence as if the gardener had stepped into the house for a moment to bring out a bag of onion sets. The air smelled so fresh and clean. The battle hadn't polluted this part of the village.

Suddenly, Terri stopped, clapped her hands and laughed. "Today is Easter Sunday, Easter Sunday, I just remembered."

"Happy Easter, Terri," we said, and kissed her.

We neared another bombed-out building. "It seems those American Easter bunnies dropped many eggs," Anni exclaimed.

"It is also April Fool's Day," Sarah declared.

Edit smiled. "I remember several years ago my father sent someone a box full of baby mice on April Fool's Day."

"So, it was your father. Oh, wait until I tell this to my father. He never knew." I

embraced Edit, and we both laughed.

From nowhere it seemed the Hauptschar pulled up with his bicycle. He told Hugo that he couldn't find anyplace for us to sleep. He pointed at a distant building on a small hill, off the road, and told him to stop there to rest.

His remark made us walk easier and faster. Upon reaching the bottom of the hill, we looked up and saw a brick factory.

"That is a good sign," Sarah shouted. "We began our prisoner lives in a brick factory and with God's help we will end it here." She climbed up and as soon as she reached the top she shouted, "There is a lot of straw around here."

The Hauptschar asked if any of us knew how to build a stove from bricks. I told him I knew how, and several of my friends helped me. Terri and I gathered the bricks, Edit found twigs and lumber, and Sarah and Anni discovered a water pump. The Hauptschar brought a pot from the wagon and told us to brew coffee for him and the guard, and threw a lit match on the straw beneath the bricks. While this was going on, at the other side of the factory, about one hundred civilian men were led up under guard. Their clothing had no marks indicating they were Jewish. The Hauptschar warned he would have our heads shaved if any of us dared to go over and talk to the men. After he and Hugo drank coffee, he told Anni to divide the rest among us. We drank, and watched the civilian driver jump off the wagon, unhitch the horse and ride away in haste. By the time the Hauptschar turned around, he was gone.

Babett said she had to relieve herself. She walked further back and talked to the male prisoners. Although the Hauptschar saw her talking, he ignored it. Babett returned and told us the men were Belgian prisoners of war and had been walking since last Sunday. They had no idea how close we were to the battle lines.

We found ourselves a place to lie down. I climbed up inside a two-wheeled wagon, lined it with straw, slumped down and quickly fell asleep. Soon after, Sarah

shook me and said the Germans were gone.

"I know today is April Fool's day, but this is no joking matter," I told her, very annoyed, and was about to go back to sleep.

"Honestly, I'm telling the truth. The Hauptschar told me not to mess up his coffee pot as he would be returning shortly. I said I wouldn't. He told me to go to sleep. I lay down and pretended, but wanted to see what he was up to." Sarah talked so exuberantly that her whole body was in motion. "He ran to the wagon, pulled out a suitcase and a loaf of bread, jumped on his bicycle and rode away fast like lightning toward the forest. He was followed by the German soldiers who were guarding the Belgians." Sarah's eyes gleamed. She waved both hands, pointing this way and that, and every way around. Her hollow cheeks glowed.

We were stunned. What should we do now, we asked each other? Sarah didn't wait for us to make up our minds. She ran to the wagon, pulled out a loaf of bread, cut it up and spread on margarine she found in a tub. We tore at the bread hungrily, and wolfed it down.

Victoria refused to eat. She called us fools and warned this was only one of their tricks. "They are coming back and we are going to be punished."

"Believe me, they are gone. This is the moment we have been waiting for," Sarah shouted. The rest of us sat dumbfounded, munching the last crumbs of the bread.

I felt weird and lightheaded, like the time when I awoke after a tonsillectomy and slowly regained consciousness. Still groggy, I shook my head and gazed heavenward with confused eyes.

Edit stood up and walked a few steps as if she were sleepwalking. "Could this be true?" she asked. Terri acted like a little child, clinging to Anni for support. Anni didn't act like an adult either. She sucked on the bread crust as if it was a candy sucker.

"They will be back," Babett said with a tormented voice.

"You don't believe me," Sarah cried continuously, and ran back to the wagon, pulled off all the suitcases and tossed them on the grass.

"Ts...ts..." Luisa shook her head.

The Belgians were awakening. They browsed around as they, too, were skeptical about the situation. It was so quiet that we could hear the birds singing in the trees of the forest. Suddenly, a platoon of German soldiers appeared running on the highway. My blood turned to glue. I held my breath and lay flat in the cart. The Germans paid no attention to us. It seemed they were concerned only about their own hides. As soon as they were out of our view, several army vehicles and tanks sped by so fast, if we had blinked, we would have missed the hurried procession.

The Belgians crawled on their stomachs until they reached us, and signaled for us to lie flat. One of them explained in German that we must watch their action and not do anything foolish.

There was a heavy silence that lasted about five minutes. I could feel the bottom of the wagon bouncing from the violent pounding of my heart. More tanks were speeding on the highway, and they sprayed bullets at the roof of the brick factory, barely missing our heads. I could hear the whizzing sound as the bullets flew by. Through the cracks of the wagon I could see that one of the Belgians had stuck his head up and a bullet rushed by his cap. Lots and lots of tanks were coming and it seemed as if they were chasing the tanks which brought up the rear of the German unit.

"They are not German tanks," I heard one of the Belgians whisper beneath the wagon.

"Americans! They are Americans." Anni stuck her head up and a bullet flew by her, hitting a wooden post supporting the roof. Anni didn't even blink. I thought surely she would pass out. In a bedazzled condition she was smiling.

"Oh, my God, there goes our freedom, and here we will die," Kati whined. The

tanks were gone and the shooting halted. The Belgians warned us to stay put. More vehicles followed. They were no longer shooting toward us. The trucks and tanks all had white stars, some had women's names and bathing beauties painted on their sides. I felt as if some ice cubes were melting over my head and dripping through my eyes.

"What are we going to do? We shouldn't let them go by," I cried.

"Let's do something before the Germans return," Rita said.

"I'm telling you, they aren't coming back," Sarah's eyes glowed even more.

The Belgians knew what to do. They took white hand towels out from their shirts, picked up some sticks from the ground, stuck them through the towels and slowly, as if in a long, rehearsed play, they walked down to the road, shouting, "Hey, Yankees." They waved their flags and like wings of angels the flags floated in the mild April breeze.

"Hallelujah!" a man shouted. "Oh, God, it's Freedom Day," I cried, and a large box of firecrackers exploded in my chest.

"...And with outstretched arms, He reached out for His children and took them out of Egypt..."

A small vehicle stopped and turned its wheels toward the hill, then rode up to the factory. We stuck our heads up and saw the soldiers jumping out. One of them took off his helmet. His hair was silver-gray and for a moment I envisioned that my father was coming toward me. He had sparkling, blue eyes and a powerful stride. I jumped up and ran toward him. I was almost at arm's length when I remembered Regina.

"If he is an American, say, 'How are you?'" but my legs refused to carry me any further. I was transfixed. My lips moved, but no sound came out. I stood like a statue on fire.

I heard Anni saying that we were Hungarian Jewish prisoners.

"Not anymore," said the officer with the silver hair, and he reached out for me. At first he scrutinized me, then he ruffled my hair, put his helmet on my head, lifted me up high as if I were a toy. On the way up, I was Prisoner 409, but when he lowered me and kissed me, I knew I was free.

"How are you, American?" I finally opened up. He put his arm around me and led me back to his small automobile. I took off the helmet and handed it to the officer. The other soldiers shouted, "Oh, what a happy day this is!" The rest of the girls rushed forward, and they embraced and kissed the American soldiers. We danced around them, shook their hands, stroked their uniforms and also the sides of the vehicle. We kicked our heels and jumped up high, clapped our hands and twirled in a dazed frenzy, as if drunk from the first sip of treasured wine. And we shouted, "Thank you, thank you, Americans!"

The Belgians were running down the road and expressed their gratitude to the Americans as they rode by.

One of the American soldiers searched our wagon. He lifted off a flat box and opened it. "Hey, hey," he shouted. "Look what I found." He pulled out a framed picture of Hitler. He threw it onto the ground and we rushed and danced on the glass until the picture was in shreds. Victoria spat on it. The soldiers were applauding.

They gave us candy and chewing gum. If someone would ask me how freedom tasted, I would say it was peppermint chewing gum. If someone would ask me how freedom smelled, I would say gasoline and grass. If someone would ask how freedom sounded, it was laughter. If someone would ask how it felt, I would say it was a rebirth of every cell in my body. If someone would ask what freedom looked like, I would say it was my father wearing an American military uniform.

Sarah was crying. She said she feared we were the only one freed, and the others were still walking someplace on the road. The silver-haired officer wanted to know

what was wrong and Anni told him. He smiled and said we should go back to the village where the rest of our sisters were already celebrating.

Sarah grabbed his hand and kissed it.

“Are the Americans going to take us home?” Lilla asked.

The officer said, “Later,” but first they had to ride to Berlin.

The soldiers jumped back into their vehicle and rode off the hill, waving. We opened some of the suitcases the Aufseherinen had left. I found a purse stuffed with money. I grabbed it and hung it over my shoulder. I also saw a pair of shoes. Instantly, I kicked off my old wooden shoes and slipped into a newer pair. Everybody took some food and we marched down the road.

We bid farewell and wished good luck to the Belgians. One of them said they were going home right away.

The highway was packed with slow-moving army vehicles. The Yankees leaned out and we shook their hands. I shouted, “Thank you,” so often that my throat hurt. Despite our aching feet we walked as if gliding on feather cushions. Victoria kept looking back. She still had the shadows of the Nazis following her.

A voice inside me was singing, “I’m free, I’m free, I’m free.” A darker voice tuned in. “Am I the same person I was before, or am I a marred skeleton shaped by my past?” Then the cheerful me took over and said, “Today is going to be the date of my birth, from now on.”

A big truck stopped. The soldiers leaned out. One of them said in Hungarian, “God be with you,” and he handed me something. I threw him a kiss. I opened the wrapper and saw a cookie-like cake and bit into it.

“Figs,” I shouted, and spat it out into the dust.

Sarah gazed at me so bewilderedly I thought she would pass out.

“I’m free, Sarah, and I hate figs.” I laughed. She threw her arms up into the air.

We reached the village square and saw the women dancing in front of the church. Big groups, small groups, individuals, singing and twirling happily, as the soldiers looked on.

"Where are Magda and Lena? Where is Irene?" we rushed from group to group. Suddenly, Anni screamed. She found them sitting in anguish on a bench near the fence of the church garden. They were crying. We ran toward them, held each other and cried. Magda explained they thought the Nazi assassins had taken us away, and Edit answered we thought the same about them. We kissed and hugged each other some more.

Debora came running toward me, "I told you He will bring us our freedom." She hugged me and said today was the fourth day of Passover. We twirled each other around. Then she was joined by her friends and they danced and sang in Hebrew.

A large truck pulled up by the church. The Americans brought back two captured soldiers. One was the mild-mannered Polish soldier, the other the old scarface, Wilhelm, who never kicked us. He was the one Berta had vowed to save from punishment.

We stared at them and debated the justice of life. The good ones were caught, while the evil ones got away. Berta was telling Elli to ask the Americans for mercy. The soldier said justice wasn't in his hand, and knowing how we felt, he assured us they would surely catch the other Nazis who had run away.

"I wish the Americans would make ground meat out of the Hauptschar, and feed it to the dogs," Terri declared.

The American soldier, who wore an arm band with the letters, M.P., told us that justice was in the hands of God.

Terri pointed at the church and said that she wanted to pray, but was afraid to go in alone. Magda reached for Terri's hand and led her up to the door. They stepped inside. The rest of us followed. The church was decorated for Easter Sunday with live

flowers and green branches. I saw the collection box near the entrance and stuffed into it all the money I had found in the purse.

Terri walked up to the altar. She made the sign of the cross, kneeled down, and put her hands together for prayer. We sat in the pews. I felt the presence of the invisible God and said the Hebrew prayer of thanksgiving.

I glanced toward Victoria and saw her smiling. Her head was bent and her lips were moving. I could make out the Hebrew words, "Shema Yisroel, Adonai..." She had found God. Tears were rolling down her cheeks. "God did perform a miracle," she whispered, when she noticed I was watching.

In the coolness of the old German village church we prayed for our liberators, and for those who died for our freedom. And we prayed for our loved ones who with God's help, we hoped we would soon be reunited. Then we kissed each other and walked out into the glory of the April sunshine.....

EPILOGUE

Shortly after our liberation our hopes of reuniting with our families turned into a dreadful reality. We discovered that of our entire village of Jewish people who were deported to Auschwitz, only five of us survived.

I doubted the justice of God, and not until after the birth of my first child did I regain my trust in Him. Still there are times when my pain surfaces, while remembering the countless Mitzvoth of those good people, and wonder why was I selected to live.

I never accepted the death of my parents and my family, and only miss their physical presence. Their love and teaching I carry within me and leave it as a legacy for generations to come.

USHMM LIBRARY



01 0001 0128 8271